

Edwina Mary Preston
Orcid.org/0000-0001-7328-3142

‘Unlocked doors’: Correspondence as female-centric writing practice

Master of Arts (Creative Writing) (Research/Creative)
School of Culture and Communication
University of Melbourne

January 2017

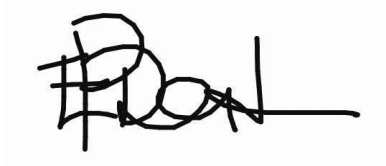
This thesis is being submitted in total completion of the Master of Arts (Creative Writing) (Research/Creative)

Abstract

The aim of this thesis is to investigate, through critical analysis and creative work, the notion of a female-centric writing practice that not only accommodates but incorporates motherhood. By dismantling the central tenets of the nineteenth century androcentric Romantic myth of creativity, this thesis begins to imagine what a female-centric creative practice, built around women’s experiences, might look like. To do so, it investigates correspondence as a writing form commonly and traditionally practised by women that subverts the approach, value systems and goals of an androcentric model of literary production. I contend that correspondence has been overlooked as a feminist model for writing practice, and that it provides a blueprint for a female-centric model of creative process — a writing practice structured around a woman’s reality that does not insist upon a ‘room of one’s own’ with ‘a lock on the door’ as proposed by Virginia Woolf in 1929. This model would not be antithetical to the realities of motherhood, but would go so far as to acknowledge the *benefits* motherhood can bring to a writing practice. I hypothesise that in correspondence a tradition of ‘writing in the midst of life’ can be found that enables mother-writers to differently conceptualise the *how* of writing, freeing them from age-old conflicts between creativity and mothering. Specifically, this thesis uses a gynocritical analysis of the correspondence of successful mid-century Australian female poet Gwen Harwood to hypothesise the potential of correspondence as a model for a female-centric creative practice.

Declaration

I declare that this thesis comprises my original work towards the Master of Arts (Creative Writing) (Research/Thesis); that due acknowledgement has been made in the text to all other materials used; and that the thesis is within the maximum word limit in length, exclusive of bibliographies.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Edwina Preston', written on a light-colored background.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank my supervisor, Grant Caldwell, for his enduring trust in the value of this work. I would also like to thank Radha O’Meara and Elizabeth Macfarlane from the School of Culture and Communication for reading and commenting on earlier versions of chapters from this thesis. Thank you also to my partner and children.

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KEY TO GWEN HARWOOD CORRESPONDENTS:

AH & BH = Alison Hoddinott and Bill Hoddinott

ADH = A D Hope

AJ = Ann Jennings

ET = Edwin Tanner

TR = Tony Riddell

VB = Vincent Buckley

VS = Vivian Smith

[I]t is necessary to have five hundred a year and a room with a lock on the door if you are to write fiction or poetry.

— Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own*

Letters did not count [as writing]. A woman might write letters while sitting by her father's sick-bed. She could write them by the fire while the men talked without disturbing them. The strange thing is, I thought, turning over the pages of Dorothy's letters, what a gift that untaught and solitary girl had for the framing of a sentence, for the fashioning of a scene.

— Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own*

Introduction

This study seeks to reconceptualise androcentric cultural models of artistic practice in the shape of women's needs, values and interests. Despite the progress of feminism in the twentieth century, the relationship between motherhood and art practice remains a vexed one for women, largely because of the persistence of a 19th century Romantic ideal of the creative artist that emphasises individual selfishness and artistic retreat as the cornerstones of committed artistic practice. I hypothesise that in the practice of correspondence a counter-model to the androcentric model of the artist can be found. This model might be used to legitimise an approach to creative work that reflects the lived experience of women — specifically, mothers — and to explore and articulate a creative practice which is, in effect, *female*-centric. To exemplify this, my research draws on the correspondence of mid-20th century Australian poet Gwen Harwood, who was both a successful poet and committed mother; and who was also a correspondent of ‘Tolstoyan’ proportions (Kratzmann 2001: ix).

The creative component of my thesis explores the relationship between a poet and her career and family life in 1950s ‘artistic’ Melbourne, using correspondence as a vehicle for the poet-mother's voice. The correspondence is fabricated to demonstrate the creative potentiality of letter-writing; the poet is an invented character, intended to be both representative of the times and to demonstrate the ongoing dialogue

between motherhood, life experience and creativity. Provided here are finished extracts from a longer intended work.

Gwen Harwood’s correspondence provides insights into her creative practice at a practical, prosaic, daily level; it also embodies her reality as mother and writer in a way that her poetry does not¹. It is, in and of itself, a body of creative work that brings Harwood to life as a thinking, breathing, modern woman and allows us access to the value systems and approaches that inform her both as a mother and a writer. It also points to ways we can revise our understanding of the conditions, contexts and processes required to write, or to undertake any creative practice.

Harwood produced more correspondence than poetry, yet she did not sequester herself from her family in order to write it. In this thesis, I explore the notion that within this correspondence — voluminous, expansive, at once humorous and deadly serious — a workable female-centric writing practice, and way of thinking about that writing practice, might be found. In the practice of correspondence, I suggest, a writer does not hold every word sacrosanct; correspondence is provisional and experimental; it can weather interruption, distraction; it can be played out on profane surfaces, amidst pots and pans, and can be broken to attend to domestic duties. Additionally, it has been a socially acceptable writing activity for women for centuries — on the one hand because of its apparent social and political benignity, but also because it does not necessitate a woman’s removal from the centre of domestic activity or from her children. In part, I hope that my thesis will give legitimacy to the idea that correspondence, far from being a benign literary activity, contains the seeds of a writing practice that might substantially subvert androcentric myths about writing, questioning in the process the conditions we believe necessary for creating ‘works of genius’.

While Harwood’s correspondence has been collected and published, it has not previously been studied for its value as writing practice, but has been utilised as

¹ Note that Harwood ‘invented’ a literary persona, Miriam Stone, under whose name she submitted and published poetry that dealt with the frustrations of her domestic reality: ‘Stone seemed to write through the voice of a woman bound to domesticity but burning with frustrated desires for romance, for poetry, for independence from repression’ (Trigg 1994: 16). This aspect of Harwood’s work is further discussed in Chapter three.

correspondence conventionally is: as biographical source material, ancillary to the published work and satisfying a corresponding appetite for biography by readers. Naturally, correspondence is inherently autobiographical, allowing insights into the daily life of the correspondent that are interesting and revealing. Correspondence can tell us much about the material/corporeal circumstances in which an author habitually works that is unavailable in the polished outcome of a ‘studied’ writing practice. However, correspondence has generally been overlooked as a literary form, or practice, in and of itself. Its female-centric potential lies in the fact that unlike the ‘master’ forms of literary production — the novel, the poem, the play — correspondence traditionally has not demanded ‘locked doors’ and as such has offered the mother-writer² a paradoxical freedom: the ability to engage in her writing without excluding, spatially and temporally, the needs of her children. Although I note the passing of correspondence as a primary mode of communication in western culture, and am not advocating a revival of the letter as literary form, I hope to identify in this thesis certain compositional truths about correspondence writing that might be incorporated more generally, and beneficially, into cultural thinking about creative practice. Central to these is the legitimisation of ‘writing in the midst of life’ (Aronson 2007: 283) rather than adhering to the androcentric artist-hero myth of sequestering oneself in a separate sphere where domestic responsibilities (specifically, the needs of children) cannot penetrate.

By positing a model of ‘writing in the midst of life’ as both practicable and potentially creatively fruitful for mother-writers, I hope that interesting illuminations about literary practice might occur that further challenge culturally sacrosanct ‘truths’ about art, literature, and genius. These ‘byproducts’ of my study might lead to a reinvigoration of the project voiced originally by Virginia Woolf in 1929, and since overhauled, challenged and expanded (though not exhaustively investigated): that is, the project of finding a sentence ‘rightly shaped for [women’s] use’; a book ‘adapted to [her] body’; a writing process that considers ‘what alternations of work and rest she needs, interpreting rest not as doing nothing but as doing something but

² I introduce the compound term ‘mother-writer’ here as a convenient shorthand for the more awkward but perhaps less categorical ‘woman writer who is also a mother’. (See Definitions in Literature Review.)

something that is different’ (Woolf 1977: 74). The project, in other words, of creating a cultural template or blueprint for the writer that takes women as its natural model. These questions, for Woolf, lay in ‘the twilight of the future’ (1977: 74). I argue that we are well past that twilight and yet, despite many valorous attempts to respond to Woolf’s questions, the answers remain at large.

SELECTION OF CORRESPONDENCE

I have selected Gwen Harwood as the subject for my research for several reasons. Firstly, she both fulfils and subverts the label of ‘conventional 1950s Australian mother’³ — she is category-defying in her individuality (as, one could argue, are all women), and yet stereotypically conventional ‘on paper’⁴. She also received comparatively serious critical attention during (or, at least, towards the end of) her active mothering years⁵; her work is now included in the Australian literary canon. In this thesis I utilise extracts from her correspondence that cover her active child-rearing years — 1950–1963. These were also years in which women writers, after startling achievements in the previous two decades, suffered what historian Susan Sheridan describes as ‘moments of eclipse’ (2011: 6), despite the Australian literary scene undergoing a ‘cultural renaissance’ with the emergence of many new literary magazines (2011: 4). It is particularly interesting to examine the lives of women writers during this period, as the 1950s (wrongly or rightly) are still derided as a period of social conservatism in Australia, in which ‘the predominant images of women in...modernity as domestic or erotic goddesses did not encompass the role of artist or intellectual’ (Sheridan 2011: 15). Harwood’s literary endeavours met with considerable sexism — her ruses to both expose and circumvent this literary sexism are interesting and singular in themselves⁶.

³ In 1961, Harwood published a scandalous hoax poem in the *Bulletin*, which spelled out FUCK ALL EDITORS when read acrostically. The scandal made newspaper headlines. Harwood wrote that, in the aftermath of the scandal, ‘[S]omeone I thought a friend said... “I thought no woman would ever use that word,” and made it clear I was cut off from decent motherhood...’ (To TR 24.8.61, Kratzmann: 135).

⁴ Harwood played with and against this view of her as a ‘conventional wife and mother’ in her frequent signing off of her letters and poetry submissions with ‘Tas. Housewife’.

⁵ Harwood’s first collection, *Poems*, was not published until 1963 — the end of the period under discussion here.

⁶ Harwood invented several ‘exotic’ male pseudonyms under which to publish her poetry. See Chapter three.

Harwood’s generation of women writers were the inheritors of the intellectual largesse of Woolf and Simone de Beauvoir — a largesse that, while providing empowerment by averring a sense of rights and entitlement, made no mention of how children might feature, or fit, within this vision of the future female writer or artist. Nevertheless, Harwood’s correspondence supports the existence of a little-recognised tradition of women writing around and alongside their family responsibilities. Her letters vividly attest to the disruptions of family life — they *write in* rather than invisibilise those disruptions — as well as indicating that such disruptions might enrich rather than deplete a creative life. Furthermore, her correspondence constitutes a vast body of work that could not have been written in sequestration from family life. Harwood had four children in quick succession and was a ‘stay-at-home mother’ — she did not have the luxury to employ a nurse or nanny for her children so that she might retire to a ‘room of her own’ to write. What she did have, however, was a ‘powerful sense of [her] own validity’ (Hilary McPhee quoted in Kelada 2006: 55), that fortified her as a poet in a hostile climate. Yet, as one discovers through her correspondence, family life provided a certain comic leverage, or balance, for her, particularly in the face of an antipathetic and sexist literary culture. As Harwood wrote, upon receipt of yet another rejection slip: ‘The children’s natural enthusiasm is a great contrast to these middle-aged elegiac notes’ (To TR 25.9.58, Kratzmann 2001: 64).

In conclusion, I propose that correspondence might be reconceived as an important and previously unacknowledged link in the identification of a traditional female literary practice. Its historical ‘lack of self-consciousness’ — its imperviousness to the ‘rules’ of a studied literary practice, its non-aspiration to acquire the status of master text or to demonstrate creative genius — enables an accidental/incidental undermining of many of the limiting truths of androcentric creative practice and thinking. In the correspondence of Gwen Harwood, mother, housewife, and published poet, we bear witness to a fresh spontaneous engagement with the present that is not available in the polished, beautifully crafted cultural artefacts that are her poems. It is the daily residue, the material excised from the poems, that is present in her correspondence and arrests the reader with its provisional, curious, precarious, and mercurial potential.

Literature Review

WOOLF AND ANDROCENTRISM

The central text that provides both the frame of reference and the point of departure for this thesis is Virginia Woolf’s 1929 essay *A Room of One’s Own*. Despite decades of critique, Woolf’s *A Room of One’s Own* remains an elusive text: deceptively simple, it breaks with many more conventions than it adheres to. It is wide-ranging and sometimes prescient in its projections — Frances L. Restuccia (1985: 262) suggests that in this single essay Woolf ‘manages to adumbrate all the major phases of feminist criticism, both sides of the basic internecine debate’. Yet it is also a contradictory document: a wheeling ‘novel-essay’ (Fry 2012: 263) that is less argument than a roving discursive play of ideas and possibilities: ‘less an organized analysis than a constantly shifting ground on which her theses intertwine, an argument less unified and fixed than multiple and transient’ (Trotman 1999: 381).

In this thesis I maintain an ambivalent position on *A Room of One’s Own*. Whilst critiquing Woolf’s central platform that ‘...it is necessary to have five hundred a year and a room with a lock on the door if [a woman is] to write fiction or poetry’ (1977: 100), I also note the internal contradictions within the essay which seem to support my thesis, and point to Woolf’s expectation that her essay would be a starting point for further feminist thinking rather than a closed argument. I have limited my discussion to *A Room of One’s Own* and have not ventured into Woolf’s other writings on women and fiction: this is because my thesis is primarily concerned with Woolf’s imprimatur that a woman writer requires a room of her own, and examining the ways in which that requirement fails to accommodate mother-writers.

In critiquing Woolf’s proposition, I have been enabled by several texts that similarly acknowledge both the empowering and limiting aspects of *A Room of One’s Own*. Particularly useful to me was Catherine Sandbach-Dahlström’s short 1993 article ‘Virginia Woolf and the appropriation of the masculine’, in which the writer examines the latent masculinist bias in Woolf’s writing — and in her thinking about writing — and the ways in which this was influenced by her Victorian upbringing and

class background. Frances L. Restuccia (1985), Nat Trotman (1999) and Lisa Rado (1997) offer contradictory opinions on Woolf’s advocacy of ‘creative androgyny’ as a solution to the problems of ‘women and fiction’. Karen Kaivola (1999) summarises the short history of theoretical thinking about Woolf’s androgyny theory, from its status as a ‘ruse’ to its potential as a subversive strategy, and finally to its dismissal as passé argument in the 1990s. Elaine Showalter in her 1992 article ‘Killing the angel in the house’ argues cogently for an interpretation of Woolf’s androgyny theory as ‘avoidance’ strategy.

Christine Battersby’s influential 1989 book *Gender and Genius* provided a comprehensive discussion of related ideas about the gendering of creativity historically, the conception of genius in western culture, and the presumptively male construct of art that still dominates western thinking. Battersby forges a compelling argument that the contemporary understanding of genius emerged alongside Romanticism at the end of the 18th century, creating a ‘swooning approach to art’ (1989: 73) that is arguably still prevalent in western culture. As well as historically positioning Woolf’s thinking, Battersby’s book assisted in the dismantling of the Romantic myth of the artist-as-hero that I undertake in Chapter one of this thesis. Linda Nochlin’s ground-breaking 1971 *ARTnews* essay, ‘Why have there been no great women artists?’ elucidated long-standing assumptions in visual arts culture about how art might be made, and according to whose value systems — Nochlin’s ideas, striking when first published, remain influential and culturally significant⁷. Her essay, and other feminist visual arts theory, was valuable to me because the androcentric cultural construction of ‘the artist’ has been roundly critiqued in the context of feminist visual art theory since the 1970s, and much of that theory is also highly applicable in a literary context.

Additionally to several articles cited below, the revised and expanded 2009 edition of feminist literary critic Elaine Showalter’s 1977 book *A Literature of Their Own: British women writers from Charlotte Brontë to Doris Lessing* was a constant

⁷ Note the republication of this essay in full in the June 2015 online edition of *ARTnews*.
<http://www.artnews.com/2015/05/30/why-have-there-been-no-great-women-artists/>

companion and go-to text, providing an expansive and yet highly particularised history of women writers and social attitudes to women writers from the nineteenth century onwards. Further biographical, historical and case-study-based texts that, whilst not theoretical, provided a contextual canvas for the ideas played out in this thesis were Drusilla Modjeska’s *Stravinsky’s Lunch* (1999), Susan Sheridan’s *Nine Lives: post-war women writers making their mark* (2011), Rachel Power (ed.) *Motherhood & Creativity: the divided heart* (2015); Ann Vickery’s *Stressing the Modern: cultural politics in Australian women’s poetry* (2007); Naomi Wolf’s *Misconceptions: truth, lies, and the unexpected on the journey to motherhood* (2003). Gwen Harwood’s correspondence is collected in Gregory Kratzmann (ed.) *A Steady Storm of Correspondence: Selected letters of Gwen Harwood 1943–1995* (2001).

In my discussion of Simone de Beauvoir’s *The Second Sex*, first published in 1949, I have used the 2009 translation by Constance Borde and Sheila Malovany-Chevallier in the 2011 Vintage edition.

GYNOCRITICISM/FEMALE-CENTRISM

Gynocritical theory — apprehended more generally under the umbrella ‘feminist cultural theory’ — is highly relevant to this thesis because gynocriticism stressed not only the existence and importance of a female tradition of literary production, but also the ‘authority of experience’ (Showalter 1981: 181) over existing academic approaches to literary theory. Central to its objectives was the identification and elevation of a ‘woman-identified epistemology’ (Donovan 1984: 99) — a way of seeing, thinking and interpreting the world according to the values and experiences of women.

My position in this thesis is that French feminist criticism proceeds on a parallel rather than an intersecting track to my own; thus, in exploring correspondence as a female-centric writing tradition and practice, I choose to work at a remove from French post-structuralist feminist criticism. This is despite the broad applicability to my discussion of Hélène Cixous’s advocacy of a language of female difference or ‘*écriture féminine*’; and Luce Irigaray’s work on motherhood. My focus is on the materiality and process of writing, and the ways in which a different understanding

about the relationship between creativity and motherhood might be afforded by considering working practices in the context of responsibility. As Elaine Showalter (1981: 184) writes, ‘The concept of *écriture féminine*...is a significant theoretical formulation in French feminist criticism, although it describes a Utopian possibility rather than a literary practice’. In erring towards Showalter’s assessment (and using Showalter’s work as critically central, as I do in this thesis) I acknowledge, however, that gynocriticism arose contemporaneously with and built on the work of French feminism and, as such, owes a debt to it. (Showalter herself, in introducing the term ‘gynocritic’ in her essay ‘Toward a Feminist Poetics’ alerts us to the term’s origins in the French ‘la gynocritique’ — See fn8 below.)

Gynocriticism was concerned with an ‘analysis of the ways in which women not only read as women but write as women’ (Gilbert 1984: 6). The term was coined by Showalter in 1979⁸ in her influential essay ‘Toward a Feminist Poetics’, in which she marks out two distinct varieties of female-centred literary scholarship: firstly, the acknowledgement and analysis of ‘*woman as reader* — with woman as the consumer of male produced literature’, and secondly, the investigation of ‘*woman as writer* — with woman as the producer of textual meaning’ (original emphases, npn). Central to gynocriticism was the location of a tradition of women’s writing and the repositioning of female-centric reading and writing strategies at the centre rather than at the margins of literary theory. Importantly, for my purposes, gynocriticism was engaged in the re-conceptualisation of creativity itself; specifically, in the investigation of a distinctive ‘psychodynamics of female creativity’ (Showalter 1979: npn). Showalter’s 1979 statement of the aims of gynocriticism is worth repeating for its clarity and simplicity: ‘[T]he program of gynocritics is to construct a female framework for the analysis of women’s literature, [and] to develop new models based on the study of female experience, rather than to adapt male models and theories’ (npn). Subsequent articles by Showalter referenced in this thesis — ‘Feminist criticism in the wilderness’ (1981), ‘Killing the angel in the house’ (1992) and

⁸ Note that there is some ambiguity about the precise date and genesis of this term (see Donovan 1984; Friedman 1996; Rich 1986). Showalter makes plain, in her 1979 essay ‘Toward a feminist poetics’, that she is ‘coining’ the term so to speak: ‘No term exists in English for such a specialized discourse, and so I have adapted the French term *la gynocritique*’ (npn).

‘American gynocriticism’ (1993) — respectively refine her discussion and expand it into new historical/cultural settings. In ‘A literature of their own revisited’ (1998) Showalter retrospectively appraises the development of gynocriticism in her own thinking and writing, as well as traversing contemporary and subsequent criticisms, providing a useful two-decade overview of gynocriticism as critical project.

Supplementary gynocentric writings that pick up from, depart from, vary and re-position Showalter’s work have also been important in elaborating my thinking, as well as alerting me to the limitations of gynocriticism as a historically discrete theoretical framework. Most of these voice conditional agreement with the principles of gynocriticism, though registering some reservations. Annette Kolodny (1980) and Nina Auerbach (1984) express admiration for Showalter’s work but criticise gynocriticism for its ‘separatist’ tendencies, Auerbach arguing more broadly for a criticism that enables ‘not the self-reflecting cycle of gynocriticism, but the transmutation of men, even patriarchs, through a female prism’ (155). Carolyn Heilbrun (1982: 810) posits a similarly non-exclusionary feminist criticism that celebrates ‘the full range of human experience’ and in which a study of women’s writing is not necessarily *always* the central project. Amongst other things (including an incisive reading of Woolf), Jane Marcus (1984: 88) calls for more ‘sisterly criticism’, less hierarchy and more toleration of differences of approach in feminist critical theory. Sally Kitch (1987) adds contributions from the burgeoning field of identity theory to Showalter’s offerings. Maria Olausson (1993: 88) discusses subsequent criticisms — in particular the criticism of gynocriticism as a largely middleclass ‘Anglophone feminist critical debate’ that excluded, in particular, black feminist voices. Susan Stanford Friedman (1996: 14) convincingly demonstrates that, due to being ‘seriously out of step with advances in theories of identity and subjectivity’ gynocriticism was, by the mid-90s, theoretically ‘passé’.

In mounting my argument for correspondence as female-centric writing practice, I recognise I am also arguing for the continued relevance of gynocriticism as theoretical method — albeit acknowledging the validity of the criticisms levelled at it. The relevance of gynocriticism for my thesis is directly connected to its aim of validating previously invisibilised interpretations and approaches to writing and reading, and of seeking a meaningful tradition that might support women writers into

the future. Recuperating female-authored works — an aspect of gynocriticism I reference in the creative component of this thesis — is part of the establishment of a female literary tradition. Insisting on the validity of female experience is also central to the establishment of this tradition. Two gynocritical texts have been particularly useful to me in illuminating the possibilities inherent in gynocriticism, theoretically and practically. Josephine Donovan (1984) explicitly examines the effects of physical, biological, *tangible* motherhood on writing in her article ‘Toward a Women’s Poetics’, broadening her theoretical approach to include contemporary developments in other disciplines such as feminist psychology and maternal practice⁹. Donovan (1984: 108) advocates a gynocritical methodology that, I believe, stands the test of time:

Gynocriticism is a part of the process, of the praxis, through which the voices of the silenced are becoming heard. Not only is gynocriticism naming and identifying what has never been named or even seen before, it is also providing a validating social witness that will enable women today and in the future to see, to express, to name, their own truths.

In particular, Donovan’s referencing of moral psychologist Carol Gilligan’s book *In A Different Voice*, which established the theory of care feminism in the early 1980s, has validated my own citing of Gilligan’s work in Chapter three. Gilligan’s work articulates the contributions care feminism can make to the production of a ‘female-centric’ value system that challenges, or at the very least, complements, the dominant cultural values of androcentrism.

The second gynocentric text that has been of great use to me is Jane Tompkins’ 1987 article ‘Me and My Shadow’, in which Tompkins puts gynocritical ideas into scholarly practice, demonstrating what a gynocritical/female-centric/subjectivity-allowing scholarship might look like, and read like, and how it might return to view the experiences of the body and self that androcentric scholarship demands are invisibilised. Of all my readings, Tompkins’ article was the only explicitly ‘scholarly’ text that challenged, in substance as well as theory, the ‘Olympian tone’ (Heilbrun 1982: 809) that continues to preside in academic writing.

⁹Additionally to Carol Gilligan’s work, Donovan draws on the work of Freudian feminist Nancy Chodorow, as well as Sara Ruddick, feminist philosopher and author of the 1989 book, *Maternal Thinking: toward a politics of peace*.

Heike Klippel looks at issues of scholarship for women in the practical context of domesticity in her 2007 article, ‘House, wife, woman, and time’, demonstrating how female value systems of care impact on the process — the time and space experiences — of female scholarly writers in a 21st century context. Anne Aronson’s 1999 ‘Composing in a material world: women writing in space and time’ provided similar insights, bolstered with relevant case studies. These texts, amongst others, contributed to my contention that the conditions under which women write have not changed dramatically in spite of two feminist revolutions, and that children continue to complicate women’s relationships with their creative or intellectual work.

PARA-LITERARY/FICTO-CRITICAL WORKS

Around the establishment of gynocriticism emerged, contemporaneously, a body of work by female writers that explored the connections and conflicts between motherhood and writing through a hybrid writing form that was at once creative, autobiographical and critical. This writing — by such authors as Adrienne Rich, Ursula Le Guin, Alicia Ostriker, Tilly Olsen, Susan Suleiman — operates at the boundaries where scholarship, autobiography and literature meet. In it, intellectual strictures are leavened by subjective anecdote; homily and profundity share the same page; metaphysical truths operate alongside ‘true stories’ of motherhood. Most importantly, in this writing motherhood is allowed entry into the theoretical fold in a way it has not been before. Showalter (1979) describes this writing as not only a ‘new women’s writing which explores the will to change’ but ‘a courageously sustained *quest for the mother*’ (my emphasis, npn). Ursula Le Guin’s essay, ‘The fisherwoman’s daughter’ (1992), in particular, has proved a rich harvest for me, articulating many of the ideas (and providing many of the examples) this thesis investigates about the residual effects of androcentrism on contemporary thinking about creativity, and the striking absence of motherhood in such thinking.

In referring to the hybrid work described above, I find myself resisting existing terminology. Neither the term ‘para-literary’ — coined by Rosalind Krauss specifically to discuss the work of Roland Barthes and Jacques Derrida¹⁰ — nor the

¹⁰ Rosalind Krauss coined this term in her article ‘Poststructuralism and the “Paraliterary”’, originally published in *October*, Vol. 13 (Summer 1980), pp. 36–40.

term ‘ficto-critical’¹¹ —a more recent refinement and application of Krauss’s original concept — seem quite fitting. Firstly, both terms, now considered virtually interchangeable, are closely aligned with poststructuralist theory. Secondly, although emergence of the term ‘para-literary’ was broadly contemporaneous with publication of the works I reference above, the term ‘ficto-critical’ was not coined until the early ’90s, and was not established in a scholarly context until the late ’90s. The retrospective application of the term ‘ficto-critical’ to works written largely in the 1970s and 1980s, would feel, to me, anachronistic. Furthermore, both ‘para-literary’ and ‘ficto-critical’ works seem to take their cues from theory, with literary devices employed as a secondary enhancement. The writings I discuss tend to work in the opposite direction, moving from the personal and creative outwards towards theory, teasing out the theoretical through the personal. It echoes that which I find valuable in correspondence itself: the approach of writing *in the midst of* experience, rather than artificially separating daily life from creative and intellectual life. I note that Adrienne Rich’s seminal 1976 text *Of Woman Born* is claimed as neither a ‘para-literary’ nor ‘ficto-critical’ work in spite of its having many characteristics in common with both; as such, Rich’s text defies literary classifications. I take a similar approach, drawing upon these writings to elucidate aspects of a female-centric approach to writing, but without aligning my discussion with the particularised theoretical understandings of the ‘para-literary’ or ‘ficto-critical’ text.

TERMS

In this thesis, although I do employ the term ‘gynocritical’ in my discussion, I prefer to use the term ‘female-centric’ throughout as less historically particular, more contemporary, and less critically ‘maligned’ so to speak.

The term ‘mother-writer’ is used throughout as convenient shorthand for the more awkward but perhaps less categorical ‘woman writer who is also a mother’. In the use of this term, I seek to give equal weight to both ‘mother’ and ‘writer’. When my discussion turns to the visual arts, I refer also to the ‘mother-artist’, noting that Ursula

¹¹ The earliest ‘best-known’ use of this term occurs in Stephen Muecke and Noel King’s 1991 paper ‘On Ficto-Criticism’ published in *Australian Book Review*. The term had reached a level of visibility by 1998 with the publication in Australia of Heather Kerr and Amanda Nettelbeck (eds) *The Space Between: Australian women writing fictocriticism*, University of WA Press.

Le Guin uses the term ‘artist-mother’ in her essay ‘The fisherwoman’s daughter’ (1992) which I draw on in this thesis.

When discussing correspondence, I refer to it as a ‘literary form’ rather than ‘genre’ or ‘medium’ — this also serves to highlight its function as a writing practice that exists outside literary hierarchies of style and genre.

In Chapter two I use the term ‘mother-guilt’ to describe the recognised experience of total responsibility that ensues upon motherhood and makes it problematic for women to seek self-realisation or -fulfilment. It is both a highly internalised experience and the product of social systems that hold mothers to elevated standards of care and responsibility. I quote Adrienne Rich (1986: 52), in full, to sum up the complexity, depth and multi-layeredness of this phenomenon:

The physical and psychic weight of responsibility on the woman with children is by far the heaviest of social burdens. It cannot be compared with slavery or sweated labor because the emotional bonds between a woman and her children make her vulnerable in ways which the forced laborer does not know; he can hate and fear his boss or master, loathe the toil; dream of revolt or of becoming a boss; the woman with children is a prey to far more complicated, subversive feelings. Love and anger *can* exist concurrently; anger at the conditions of motherhood can become translated into anger at the child, along with the fear that we are not “loving”; grief at all we cannot do for our children in a society so inadequate to meet human needs becomes translated into guilt and self-laceration. This “powerless responsibility” as one group of women has termed it, is a heavier burden even than providing a living—which so many mothers have done, and do, simultaneously with mothering—because it is recognized in some quarters, at least, that economic forces, political oppression, lie behind poverty and unemployment; but the mother’s very character, her status as a woman, are in question if she has “failed” her children’.

OVERVIEW

This thesis consists of three critical chapters and a creative work.

Chapter one explains and deconstructs the 19th century Romantic myth of the artist-hero, beginning with a discussion of androcentric thinking in the visual arts. Here I examine and question the central tenets of this myth: selfishness, solitude, transcendence, and genius, and show the ways in which they are constructed according to a unilaterally masculinist experience of art-making and life. Further, this chapter provides a broad overview of the historically documented conflict, and

perceived incompatibility, between motherhood and creativity when art-making is understood, valued, and practised according to the Romantic myth.

Chapter two discusses the ways early twentieth century feminism promulgated a similarly androcentric view of creativity to the exclusion of mother-artists. The chapter begins with a brief overview of Simone de Beauvoir’s thoughts on motherhood and art in *The Second Sex*, and then moves to more specific and detailed discussion of Virginia Woolf’s *A Room of One’s Own*. Revisiting Woolf remains important because ‘Woolf in the twentieth-first [sic] century is widely accepted as a “mother” through whom feminists think back, be they of liberal, socialist, psychoanalytical, post-structural, radical or utopian persuasion’ (Park 2005: 119). I revisit Woolf’s arguments, and the contemporary thinking that informed those arguments, in order to examine how a perceived conflict between a woman’s creative work and her children remains residually present in contemporary mother-artists’ creative practice. Here I argue that Woolf and De Beauvoir failed to fully articulate possibilities for a truly female-centric creative practice precisely because they failed to account for motherhood. Further, I suggest that childlessness was an implied third ‘precondition’ in Woolf’s conception of the female writer, bolstered by her ‘solution’ to gendered thinking about creativity: ‘creative androgyny’.

Chapter three begins to imagine what a writing practice governed by women’s interests and value systems might actually look like. Here I utilise the correspondence of mid-twentieth century Australian poet Gwen Harwood to demonstrate the authority and validity of an alternative tradition of female writing practice that does not privilege selfishness and retreat over connectedness and care. In the correspondence of Harwood I demonstrate a writing practice that can be maintained alongside and within the competing responsibilities of daily life, and that can be enriched by its contact with daily life, rather than requiring withdrawal from it.

Chapter four comprises the creative component of this thesis and seeks to demonstrate two aspects of gynocritical theory in a creative context: 1) late twentieth century cultural repositioning of works of female authorship, and 2) correspondence as writing practice. The creative work comprises fabricated correspondence from a mid-century obscure female poet to her sister, Tilde, chronicling her life,

motherhood, literary career and marriage in a style that is at once intimate and literary. The correspondence has been collected and is presented to her now adult son by a feminist press that wishes to publish her work posthumously, reclaiming for her a reputation in Australian letters.

Chapter One: The androcentric tradition

In order to imagine a female-centric model of creative practice, it is first necessary to tease out the conceptualisation of artistic achievement that has prevailed for most of the last two centuries. The androcentric myth of the artist as a ‘hero’, whose selfishness is legitimised by the ‘transcendent’ works of art he creates, has influenced western thinking about art and literature since its entrenchment in nineteenth century Romanticism. In this chapter I will examine the ways in which this myth excludes the experience of women artists who are mothers, and will identify certain recurring tropes enshrined in the androcentric myth that are incompatible with— indeed, inimical to — motherhood. In effect, this chapter will explore why there is a need for the articulation of a female-centric model of creative practice.

As noted in my Literature Review, I have found it useful to draw on feminist visual arts theory to effectively challenge the Romantic artist-hero image, as there remains much of value to be extracted from feminist visual arts theory that can be equally applied to creative practice across disciplines.

THE LONE HERO

The nineteenth century Romantic image of the male artist, solitary, emotionally unencumbered, and given over entirely to his work, was a given in western cultural thinking from the early 1800s until it began to be challenged by second wave feminist art historians in the 1970s. Even as late as 1940s Australia, when ‘women [painters] were a driving force in establishing modernist forms and ideas in Australia’ (Rentschler 2006: 121), the influential Australian painter and teacher Max Meldrum could unequivocally state:

[T]here would never be a great woman artist and there never had been. Women had not the capacity to be alone; nature had decided that for them at childbirth. Every great painter had to be able to walk out under the stars

alone, with no companion, no guide and just go along his chosen path. No woman could do this (Meldrum quoted in Rentschler 2006: 122).

Meldrum’s statement can be taken as representative of thinking about art until relatively recently¹²: that ‘great art’ — however it is measured — can only ‘emerge’ in circumstances where detachment from competing responsibility is complete; where an artist can exist in a form of solo communion with nature and the divine, untroubled by the prosaic reality of practical obligations, work and family. Art historian Juliet Peers (2000: 12) calls this one of ‘the most cherished myths of the present art market/discourse’: a ‘romantic legend’ that ‘tends to exempt men...from responsibility’ and belongs to a continuing ‘rhetoric of male heroics’ (2000: 14). In her influential 1971 essay ‘Why have there been no great women artists?’ art historian Linda Nochlin, rather more fiercely, describes the androcentric artist-hero myth as the ‘entire, romantic, elitist, individual, and monograph-producing substructure upon which the profession of art history is based’ (n.p.).

When considering the contributions women have made to the creative arts, Nochlin suggests we should be asking, not the singular ironically-posed question of her essay title, but a series of broader questions that challenge cultural assumptions about ‘creativity, ‘great art’ and ‘artistic genius’ in themselves. How and by whom are these constructs measured? What conditions have prevented women from achieving artistic ‘greatness’? Do women conceive of their creative achievements according to different, less-individualistic understandings of ‘success’ and ‘ambition’? What *is* ‘genius’ anyway?

Once we begin to analyse the ‘purposes’ behind the androcentric artist myth, a different conversation might be had: a conversation that is cognizant of the gendering

¹² Rentschler (2006: 127) suggests that, in Australia, it was not until 1975, International Women’s Year, that women’s art began to appear on art museum walls: ‘Women’s art had been invisible until that time, as their reputations had been destroyed and contributions forgotten. In fact, it took an exhibition of Australian women artists by [writer and historian] Janine Burke in 1975 to begin to change attitudes to women’s art’. Incidentally, this exhibition was called *A Room of One’s Own*.

of creativity, opportunity, and artistic merit, and is prepared to challenge long-held ‘truths’ that look, upon deeper probing, very much like masculinist ‘obfuscation’ (Nochlin 1971: npn). Taking Nochlin’s cue, it is not difficult to see that the androcentric myth of the artist *works for men*. Or perhaps this is better stated in the reverse: the androcentric myth of the artist is clearly not orchestrated around the experiences, responsibilities and life expectations of women. Single women without children might wrest space within it for themselves, but mother-artists will find their experiences and needs almost entirely excluded. They will be asked to think and act and work in a way that interferes impossibly not only with society’s expectations of mothers, but with their own internalised identities as the nurturers of dependent children.

THE GAUGUIN POSE

The androcentric myth encapsulates and perpetuates an experience of creative practice that validates and, indeed, deifies a form of selfishness that is censured (though tolerated) by western society when it occurs in men, and reviled when it occurs in women. Absence from the domestic sphere; economic irresponsibility; an otherwise-reprehensible unreliability in practical affairs; erraticism; self-centredness; self-immersion: all of these are legitimised when manifested in the person of a *bona fide* artist or writer. Indeed, they are the Romantic traits by which we traditionally understand the peculiar cultural construct that is *the artist*. Writer Ursula Le Guin (1992) calls this array of behaviours and attitudes the ‘Gauguin Pose’¹³, describing it as a form of ‘heroic infantilism’ (1992: 223) in which no material responsibility is brought to bear on the male artist for his abandonment of social and economic obligations:

[The male artist’s] responsibility is to the work alone. [This] is a motivating idea of the Romantics, it guides the careers of poets from Rimbaud to Dylan Thomas to Richard Hugo, it has given us hundreds of hero figures, typical of whom is James Joyce himself and his Stephen Dedalus. Stephen sacrifices all “lesser” obligations and affections to a “higher” cause, embracing the moral

¹³ In 1891, the post-Impressionist artist Paul Gauguin famously abandoned his wife and five children, as well as his job as a stockbroker, to follow his artistic vocation as a painter, living thereafter in Tahiti.

irresponsibility of the soldier or the saint. This heroic stance, the Gauguin Pose, has been taken as the norm—as natural to the artist—and artists, both men and women, who do not assume it have tended to feel a little shabby and second-rate (Le Guin 1992: 222).

The ‘Gauguin Pose’ can be found across all creative disciplines: it is behind composer Igor Stravinsky’s demand that silence be imposed on his family during luncheon, ‘the assumption [being] that the sound of a man's children can be detrimental to his art’ (Modjeska 1999: 19). It is behind the invisible female hand that puts food on the table and ministers to the needs of the novelist Joseph Conrad as he ‘wrestle[s] with the Lord for [his] creation’ (Le Guin 1992: 223). Although the 19th century construct of the artist has devolved into something of a caricature over time, our thinking is still influenced by the ideas it/he personifies; ideas that do not derive from women’s understanding of their place in the world. Australian poet Gwen Harwood, considering this construct in 1960, accepts its existence but rejects, with a combination of weariness and self-effacement, its applicability to herself:

Rilke fed his genius at the expense of everything else; he would have scorned utterly my attempts to combine domesticity with poetry. I think that real genius brings with it the necessary hardness; I haven’t got the final streak of hardness, and lack the corresponding stratum of talent (To TR 29.2.60, Kratzmann 2001: 94).

Harwood may not have had Rilke’s ‘streak of hardness’, but her own career proves that such a trait is not necessary to establish oneself as a poet: Harwood’s poetry was included in the Australian literary canon well within her lifetime.

The social exemption society extends to Gauguin and Stravinsky and Conrad — and Rilke — does not, however, operate equally to excuse a ‘streak of hardness’ when it manifests in women artists. For instance,

Victorian society greeted women who moved beyond conventional social structures and gender roles ... as hideous inverts and sexual freaks. The “selfish” woman who pursued her own intellectual ambitions above her duty to others “not only risked nervous exhaustion and wasting diseases; she might also develop dangerously masculine physiological characteristics. Her breasts might shrivel, her menses become irregular or cease altogether. Sterility could ensue, facial hair might develop” (Carroll Smith-Rosenberg cited in Kaivola 1999: 246).

In the late 19th century women novelists gained sanction for ‘selfish’ attentiveness to their creative work only when it might be re-interpreted as essentially *unselfish*. Bearing the financial responsibility for a family and children, for instance, ‘not only excused the profession [of writing] but also transmuted its more egoistic qualities into “real womanly woman’s work” — i.e. work for others’ (Showalter 2009: 46). In circumstances other than these — where there was no legitimising cause for which a woman writer exercised herself — the female ambition to write was decidedly unsettling:

The self-centredness implicit in the act of writing made this career an especially threatening one; it required an engagement with feeling and a cultivation of the ego rather than its negation (Showalter 2009: 18).

One might assume that such double standards were long-buried relics of a Victorian past, but as late as 2003 feminist writer Naomi Wolf suggested that putting one’s own interests before one’s children, even notionally, remains problematic and anxiety-producing for modern women, in spite their cognizance of a right to equality:

Women’s willingness to sacrifice themselves for the good of their children is something that our society —from individuals to institutions—relies upon. It is useful leverage in pressuring women of all classes into giving in, in different ways, to unequal deals, negotiated hesitantly from the place of vulnerability that is one’s concern for one’s child (Wolf 2003: 228).

Similarly, ‘total devotion to professional art production’ (Nochlin 1971: npn), as demanded by the androcentric myth, poses a challenge to mother-artists beyond that of practical time management and space contingencies. Rooms of one’s own and independent incomes do not neutralise the emotional and psychological intensity of motherhood. It is no coincidence that ‘amateurism’ is the charge by which women’s contributions have traditionally been dismissed in the visual arts. Artistic commitment that is less than ‘total’ is immediately ‘tainted by the slur of amateurism’ according to the androcentric myth (Rentschler 2006: 127), a slur that most artists understandably wish to avoid. The mother-artist, ‘negotiat[ing] hesitantly from the place of vulnerability that is... concern for one’s child’, as Naomi Wolf puts it above,

is therefore at an impasse. She faces a charge of unwomanly selfishness should she prioritise her creative practice; a charge of amateurism should she prioritise her child.

It follows that the trope of ‘total devotion’ to art could never serve as a model for mother-artists. Upon giving birth — or, indeed, before that — a mother becomes party to an essential care relationship that, both by default and by choice, biologically and emotionally, depends on her. Maternal love, as described by Naomi Wolf (2003: 262), is ‘strong, tenacious, resourceful, without shame’; it is not transferable nor easily put to one side, even temporarily. The androcentric myth pits this love against creative practice as contenders for a mother’s ‘total devotion’. The result is a predicament for mother-artists.

Of course, a woman need not really make a choice between her child and her art. The choice is a fiction: an artificial crisis based on an unchallenged, unilateral idea of what art demands of its practitioners. Even in the heart of the nineteenth century, women novelists sought to repair what they saw as an unnatural rift between a woman’s domestic life and her life as a writer:

Up until about 1880, feminine novelists felt a sincere wish to integrate and harmonize the responsibilities of their personal and professional lives. Moreover, they believed that such a reconciliation of opposites would enrich their art and deepen their understanding (Showalter 2009: 50).

By the turn-of-the-century, with the acceleration of the suffrage movement, feminist poets like Mary Gilmore positively proselytised the value and dignity of motherhood, though this did not translate into any revision of popular ideas about art and artists¹⁴. But the notions of domesticity and art do not easily sit alongside each other in the imagination, let alone intermingle. As Virginia Woolf wrote: how to harmonise the contradictory image that is ‘the spirit of life and beauty in a kitchen chopping up suet’? (1977: 43) The Romantic notion of women as repositories of beauty, purity

¹⁴ Gilmore’s belief in the dignity of motherhood was accompanied by a demand for sexual equality in marriage that was significantly ahead of its time. She also made much valid complaint about women’s domestic burdens, burdens she thought ought to be redressed by radical social reorganisation (Vickery 2007: 24).

and wisdom does not allow for the prosaic reality of most women’s lived experience. And the requirements of art, its dazzling ideals of ‘transcendence’ and its concomitant belief in ‘genius’, cannot coexist alongside the banal and repetitive tasks of the average woman’s world: housekeeping, cooking, child-rearing, all of which require measure, reliability, routine — not sudden dashes of artistic inspiration or troughs of artistic despair.

THE UNIVERSAL MALE

The androcentric myth is equally biased in its prescriptions of what comprises ‘art-worthy’ subject matter. It portrays the experiences of men as the universal experiences of humankind. War, romantic love, betrayal, death: these are all transformative experiences, to be enshrined as central to the human condition. Pregnancy and birth, however, are ancillary; motherhood is generally absent (unless as represented by the Virgin Mary¹⁵); and filial love only occasionally present (usually between father and son, not mother and daughter). Alternately, when these pivotal human experiences are expressed, they are expressed from the male, not the female, perspective. As Elaine Showalter (1979: npn) rightly observes: ‘Too many literary abstractions which claim to be universal have in fact described only male perceptions, experiences’. What would it ‘signify to all women, and men, to live in a culture where childbirth and mothering occupied the kind of position that sex and romantic love have occupied in literature and art for the last five hundred years, or the kind of position that warfare has occupied since literature began?’ asks poet Alicia Ostriker (2001: 160). One assumes that, had this been the case, childbirth and mothering would have featured as central transformative dramas in life, celebrated and marked as such, rather than pushed to the periphery. Why, for instance, have there not been more celebrated poems about motherhood, like Judith Wright’s 1949 ‘Woman to Man’, which explores the ancient, essential, unknowable mystery of

¹⁵ As Julia Kristeva puts it: ‘After the Virgin [Mary], what do we know about the inner discourse of a mother?’ (Kristeva quoted in Suleiman 1985: 368, Suleiman’s parentheses)

growing a child inside one's own body? The explanation is that the most transformative biological and emotional impacts of childbirth occur in the lives of women, not men. Yet it remains that birth and mothering (or being mothered) are foundational experiences that bind us as humans across race, gender, geography and time. Alice Walker (2001: 143) writes:

What is true about giving birth is... that it is miraculous. It might even be the one genuine miracle in life (which is, by the way, the basic belief of many "primitive" religions). The "miracle" of nonbeing, death, certainly pales, I would think, beside it.

THE ARTIST-PROPHET

A 'semi-religious' way of thinking about the artist in western culture may also have militated against the expression in art and literature of essentially female experiences such as mothering. 'The artist's role is elevated to hagiography in the nineteenth century,' writes Nochlin, 'when art historians, critics, and, not least, some of the artists themselves tended to elevate the making of art into a substitute religion, the last bulwark of higher values in a materialistic world' (1971: npn). Christine Battersby (1989: 43) concurs, extending Nochlin's time-frame into the twentieth century where the 'genius' of the individual artist becomes a sublime force:

'"I am the author." "I am male." "I am God." Romantic and Modernist art binds these three sentences into an unholy trinity.' Battersby goes on to show the historical and linguistic biases that have prejudiced western culture towards an understanding of the artist as godhead — from the origins of the term 'masterpiece' (1989: 25) to Byron's famous claim that the artist is 'half dust, half deity' and Shelley's equally Romantic image of the artist as Prometheus, stealing fire from the Gods (1989: 36). Indeed, the parallels between the 19th/20th century artist and the religious seeker are unmistakable: like a prophet, the great artist is liable to be misunderstood, or find himself preaching a message the world is not yet ready to hear (one thinks inevitably of Van Gogh). Like a prophet, the great artist 'walks alone', seeking his 'truth', abdicating his claim on, and responsibility to, earthly concerns. Both realms — that of the prophet and that of the great artist — are exclusively male.

There are no religious role models through which women artists might create an equivalent spiritual mystique — apart from those of pre-Christian, ancient goddess-cults¹⁶. The Virgin Mary provides neither the ‘matrilineal tradition of cultural achievement’ (Battersby 1989: 10) that would give women legitimacy as practising artists in their own right, nor a matriarchal honouring of female fertility that would endow the role of motherhood with spiritual and cultural cachet. The Virgin Mary’s role is son-centred; her maternity, as Adrienne Rich (1986: 94) remarks, is not *‘for-herself’* (original emphases). Nor does any other western female religious figure enshrine the work of child-birthing and -rearing, let alone depict women as ‘natural’ enactors of culture. In Genesis, for instance, woman’s fertility is not an inherent part of her own person and experience. Eve is ‘taken out of Adam’s body’ and her ‘procreative power’, when she receives it, is endowed as a punishment or ‘curse’; it is not something to be celebrated (Rich 1986: 119)¹⁷.

So too the language used in androcentric thinking to discuss artistic accomplishment resonates with the language of religious epiphany or revelation. The word ‘transcendent’, as commonly used in 20th century art history and theory, both describes a work of art that eclipses, technically and conceptually, its predecessors, and articulates the mysteriously ‘spiritual’ experience of the art-making process. It is a term that works to shroud both artwork and artist in a form of mysticism or unknowability, obfuscating attempts to understand intellectually how, and under what conditions, a work of art is made. It encourages instead the notion that a great artist is compelled by an irresistible higher force that separates him from the rest of us and elevates him to a superior realm: the realm of ‘genius’.

¹⁶ ‘The images of the prepatriarchal goddess-cults did one thing; they told women that power, awesomeness, and centrality were theirs by nature, not by privilege or miracle; the female was primary’ (Rich 1986: 94).

¹⁷ Rich (1986: 128) notes that until ‘well into the nineteenth century’ the notion that pain in childbirth was a ‘punishment from God’, going back to Genesis, was taken literally, with the result that women were expected to bear such pain passively as rightful retribution.

THE GENIUS

In challenging the androcentric myth as an adequate model to represent mother-artists, so too its centrepiece, the idea of ‘genius’, requires further interrogation. Nochlin (1971: npn) describes genius as ‘an atemporal and mysterious power somehow embedded in the person of the Great Artist’. Battersby (1989: 44) calls it a ‘kind of psychic beard’, tracing its almost-exclusively male designation to the fact that the term’s original Latin definition was ‘male fertility’ (1989: 26). What is surprising is how uncontested the concept of ‘genius’ remains: it defies coherent explanation or objective measurement; and the label, once bestowed, is rarely contradicted. To continue the religious parallels, one might understand genius as a form of secular ‘grace’, ineluctable, indefinable, and passively experienced by its recipient. As in the case of Gauguin — and to the point of caricature — it has enabled society to exempt what otherwise looks like unethical behaviour or erraticism: ‘For the ancient but still powerful demonic myth prepares us to accept the warped and bizarre personality to be an indicator of talent and even...proof of genius’ (Wayne 1973: 414). In other words, we tend to expect heightened and perhaps even antisocial behaviour of our ‘geniuses’, and as a result, we tend also to envisage our geniuses as male. Although certain women artists might, in isolation, fit the mould, the steady responsible woman who can be relied upon as mother, homemaker and carer represents the antithesis of ‘genius’ as we have come culturally to understand it.

Writer and critic Ursula Le Guin uses Louisa May Alcott’s 19th century novel *Little Women*, one of the few popular nineteenth century novels that has a female writer as a central character, to contest the notion of ‘genius’ in art. Jo March, when under the influence of ‘scribbling’, experiences what the Romantic myth would describe as a ‘transcendental’ experience of creativity: ‘[She fell] into a vortex [...of...] entire abandon’, a form of bliss in which she was ‘unconscious of want, care, or bad weather’ (Alcott quoted in Le Guin 1992: 214–15). But neither Jo, nor by extension Alcott, confuse this experience of creative ‘rapture’ with ‘genius’. Indeed, this

‘passion of work and this happiness that blessed [Jo] in doing it are fitted without fuss into a girl’s commonplace life at home’ (Le Guin 1992: 215). When Jo’s work is published, it is a joy for the whole household: a celebration within the domestic sphere of a work of art made within that same sphere. Rather than rarefy art-making as an activity reserved for visionaries or saints, Alcott, says Le Guin (1992: 214), provides a model that puts art within the reach of ‘any “mere girl”’. Although Jo’s literary accomplishments give her great joy, she does ‘not think herself a genius by any means’ (Alcott quoted in Le Guin 1992: 215). She is no one special: a girl amongst other girls in a family. Alcott demystifies, and ultimately deflates, the androcentric myth by, essentially, democratising it.

In the next chapter, I will consider the ways in which early feminism reiterated androcentric beliefs about ‘genius’ and ‘transcendence’. Most specifically, I will discuss Virginia Woolf’s stipulated condition of ‘a room of one’s own’, and her notion of the writer’s ‘creative androgyny’ in order to demonstrate how both requirements perpetuate androcentrism in art and literature into the twentieth century.

Chapter Two: Feminist androcentrism

The work of early twentieth century feminists Simone de Beauvoir and Virginia Woolf have informed feminist thinking for nearly one hundred years, setting in motion questions and arguments about women’s roles and rights that resonate to this day. In literature, in particular, Woolf’s slim elegant 1929 essay, *A Room of One’s Own*, has framed and validated many a female writing career. De Beauvoir’s significantly weightier *The Second Sex* (first published in 1949) investigates and seemingly exhausts questions of women’s history, biology, mythology and psychology — often through an examination of literature. This thesis does not suggest that these works were less than transformative in the lives of many women and in the development of a twentieth century feminist critical practice. However, neither writer interprets motherhood as a beneficial experience for creativity, and neither positions mothers as creators of culture/art/literature. I contend that, as a result, the models of creativity de Beauvoir and Woolf propound are not truly female-centric.

It remains particularly important to examine Woolf’s insistence that a woman writer have a room of her own, as this proposition has formed the cornerstone of twentieth century feminist thinking about women’s literary productions. The requirement of a room of one’s own, however, actually confirms an innate androcentric bias in Woolf’s thinking. As academic Heike Klippel (2007: 138) neatly puts it: ‘E]very form of theoretical or creative work, in requiring a certain degree of seclusion, participates in the culture of masculine erudition’. Behind Woolf’s apparently simple, self-evident conclusion is a presumption that in order to write a woman writer, like her male counterpart, will be ‘unburdened’ by children, and able to demand a space of her own that is inviolable. It thus presupposes childlessness — or at least militates *against* motherhood — on the part of the female writer. In the discussion that follows, I will

suggest that childlessness is, in fact, an implied third condition¹⁸ in the model for the woman writer that Woolf proposes, and that her model cannot, as a result, be considered truly female-centric.

Whilst acknowledging it reverses the chronology of these texts’ publication¹⁹, I will first here treat briefly of De Beauvoir on art and motherhood in *The Second Sex* and will then move on to discuss in more depth the conditions for writing that Woolf lays down in *A Room of One’s Own*.

DE BEAUVOIR AND WOOLF: MATERNAL NEGLECT

Christine Battersby (1989: 105) identifies as problematic de Beauvoir’s uncritical acceptance — and subsequent perpetuation — of existing androcentric notions about genius and transcendence in *The Second Sex*. ‘In the writings of Simone de Beauvoir,’ Battersby says, ‘we can see how Romantic presuppositions about art made even the “mother” of second-wave feminism unfair to women’. According to de Beauvoir, fulfilment of human creative potential is possible only through the male ‘heroic’ approach of going out into the world and creating something beyond oneself. An artist, she says, must escape the stultifying influence of the home (2011: 468) so as to ‘transcend’ limitations of mind and body and achieve, in the process, some form of immortality through their work: ‘It is he [the male] who embodies transcendence. Woman is destined to maintain the species and care for the home, which is to say, immanence’ (2011: 443). Even de Beauvoir’s choice of word here — ‘species’ — casts a curious quasi-scientific light on the role and duties of a mother in regards to her children.

The fact that the two most significant feminist writers of the early 20th century were both childless ought not to be either overlooked or underestimated. Indeed, one cannot help speculating whether motherhood might have enjoyed higher status, centrality and validation in both feminist and broader 20th century cultural debate had de Beauvoir and Woolf been mothers themselves. However, like her male counterparts, de

¹⁸ The second condition proposed by Woolf as necessary for a female writer was an independent income or, in the currency of 1929: ‘five hundred [pounds] a year’ (Woolf 1977: 100).

¹⁹ De Beauvoir’s *The Second Sex* was first published in 1949; Woolf’s *A Room of One’s Own* in 1929.

Beauvoir does not see any transformative power or attainment of human wisdom in the experience of giving birth to and rearing children (it is worth noting that her chapter on motherhood in *The Second Sex* begins with twelve pages on abortion and sterility). De Beauvoir does not consider motherhood an ‘archetypal experience’ from which art-worthy knowledge or wisdom might be attained (Rabuzzi quoted in Donovan 1984: 104). On the contrary, she is almost merciless in her debunking of the belief that motherhood might connect a woman with the essential ‘art-worthy’ mysteries of life — questions of mortality, existence, generational succession. Nor does she consider mothering an engaged or creative activity. Pregnancy, if not an ‘ordeal’ (2011: 543), is ‘pure inertia’ (2011: 539). And motherhood itself seems, in de Beauvoir’s reckoning, to *happen to* a woman without any exertion of will or agency on her part. Radical and wide-ranging though de Beauvoir’s text might be in other ways, at this fundamental level, her concessions to the artist-hero myth are striking to the 21st century reader — striking because she seems to have failed so spectacularly to revise, or even to identify, the masculinist ‘fictions’ which inform western ideas about art. For de Beauvoir — as for Gauguin and Stravinsky — art remains a ‘project’ requiring disentanglement from family and obligations, not an expression of such entanglements.

Woolf, in *A Room of One’s Own*, is antipathetic to literature by women that draws on daily lived experience: such experiences must be invisibilised in order for ‘greatness’, or ‘incandescence’, in art to be achieved (Woolf 1977: 50). ‘Woolf,’ writes Elaine Showalter (1992: 210), ‘chose avoidance... [of women’s] unthinkable, unspeakable or unprintable’ experiences. Certainly Woolf suggests that to write directly from female experience — in the midst of rather than at a distance from everyday responsibilities, resentments and labours — is to write from an inferior starting point. Such a writer, she says, will ‘write foolishly where she should write wisely’, her subsequent works emerging ‘deformed and twisted’ (1977: 67). Had Charlotte Brontë excised from her writing the anger she felt at being circumscribed on account of her sex, her books would have been much better, Woolf continues. Sandbach-Dahström (1993: 217) points out that in this harsh judgement of Brontë one can see at work Woolf’s ‘debt to inherited androcentric concepts of literary production’. Certainly, Woolf succumbs without question to the traditional androcentric valuing of objectivity over subjectivity in cultural pursuits, a valuing that, as Jane Tompkins puts it, ‘uphold[s] a male

standard of rationality that militates against women being recognized as culturally legitimate sources of knowledge' (1987: 171). Showalter (1992: 209) points out that it is precisely Brontë's personal anguish, her 'bitter consciousness of oppression', that gives her books what Showalter describes as 'the authority of experience' — which we might also understand as the integrity of subjective truth — and contracts them with the 'spasm of pain' that Woolf believes so crippling. Showalter suggests that not only might this 'spasm of pain' create a truer, more meaningful expression of female reality, it also belongs to the very female tradition Woolf is, in *A Room*, keen to establish. She goes on to quote feminist Ellen Moers from an influential 1963 *Harper's* article: '[T]he authentic line from which women writers trace their descent is one of protest, innovation, and confrontation' (Showalter 1992: 209); this is strikingly different from the line of calm objective measure that Woolf advocates in *A Room*, at the end of which all 'impediments' (1977: 94) are cleanly wiped away and anger has been transformed into 'freedom and peace' (1977: 99).

Woolf's use of an androcentric valuing system to point out the flaws in Brontë seems odd for a writer who, in the same year if not the same breath, said that the female author will find herself 'perpetually wishing to alter the established values — to make serious what appears insignificant to a man, and trivial what is to him important' (Woolf quoted in Kolodny 1980: 13). Elsewhere in *A Room* Woolf discusses the potentiality of a female value system, an idea that would not properly be explored for another half century: '[The female sensibility] lighted on small things and showed that perhaps they were not small after all' (1977: 88). Yet ultimately she shies away from fully examining the difference she alludes to. The capacity to bear children, surely a core element in 'female difference', is virtually elided as subject in *A Room*, where children are present almost as asides, or adjuncts, to 'female life' without their impact on female life actually undergoing examination²⁰. Though the existence of children has an indirect bearing on the 'types' of books women might ultimately write, they do

²⁰ Woolf is humorously flippant about the mother's role: 'Consider the facts, we said. First there are nine months before the baby is born. Then there are three or four months spent in feeding the baby. After the baby is fed there are certainly five years spent in playing with the baby. You cannot, it seems, let children run about the streets. People who have seen them running wild in Russia say that the sight is not a pleasant one' (1977: 23). It is also commonly accepted, however, that the fact that Woolf did not have children herself was productive of some grief in her life. (See fn33.)

not require particular discussion but can be included within the generally expected ‘interruptions’ or ‘impediments’ (1977: 94) to the practice of writing Woolf describes:

[A]t a venture one would say that women’s books should be shorter, more concentrated, than those of men, and framed so that they do not need long hours of steady and uninterrupted work. For interruptions there will always be.²¹

And while Woolf argues for a woman’s ‘sentence’ (1977: 73) and a female tradition in writing, she then retreats to the androcentric tenet of solitude — the garret, or ‘writer’s tower’ (Sandbach-Dahström: 1993: 269) — as the natural setting in which such a sentence and tradition might be forged. She does not go so far as to question whether the traditional ‘sacred’ artist’s space — the ‘room of one’s own’ — is the ideal environment in which a female artistic practice might flourish. Nor does she consider that, for a woman with children, an inviolable, secluded working space might be impracticable both to insist upon and to maintain.

Woolf is a singular figure both in literature and in feminist history, but she could not altogether escape her time, her upbringing, or her status as a member of the ‘late Victorian literary upper classes’ (Ford Maddox Ford quoted in Park 2005: 128). In *A Room of One’s Own*, she articulates a refusal to conspire with the ‘rhetoric of male heroics’ (Peers 2000: 14), seeking instead practical answers to the question: ‘What conditions are necessary to the creation of works of art?’ (Woolf 1977: 26) But at the source of her interrogation, the masculine experience of art and art-making remains ‘the unquestioned... unacknowledged given of the culture’ (Kolodny 1980: 4). Indeed, Battersby (1989: 104) suggests that Woolf ‘measured her own aesthetic achievement against Romantic ideals of creativity’²². Woolf urges towards the discovery of a female-centric aesthetic and value system in literature but supplies little scrutiny of entrenched androcentric myths that might impede such discovery. Further to her call for ‘a room of one’s own’, she also perpetuates the Romantic myth of genius without challenging its gendered, socially constructed history. ‘Genius’ is,

²¹ It is, however, interesting to note children’s incidental, unobtrusive presence in Woolf’s essay in such moments as these: ‘It was a woman Edward Fitzgerald, I think, suggested who made the ballads and the folk-songs, crooning them to her children...’ (1977: 48); ‘He would open the door of drawing-room or nursery, I thought, and find her among her children perhaps...’ (1977: 82–3).

²² Battersby goes so far as to link this to Woolf’s suicide. (See Battersby 1989: 104.)

for Woolf, a ‘shared cultural [assumption] so deeply and long ingrained’ (Kolodny 1980: 6) that it wears the illusion of truth: ‘[T]o write a work of genius is almost always a feat of prodigious difficulty’, Woolf says (1977: 50). Like de Beauvoir, she not only fails to repudiate genius as central plank of the artist myth, she fails even to identify it as problematic. Certainly, none of the female literary ‘geniuses’, or potential geniuses, she identifies are mothers²³.

Despite *A Room*’s illumination of age-old systemic bias against women in letters, Woolf is, as noted above, a product of her age and upbringing. Her ‘inherited concept of literary history — in so far as it is based on the Romantic belief in the privileged creative mind of the artist — is that of the great tradition of the men of letters [she] literally absorbed ... at her father’s knee’ (Sandbach-Dahlström 1993: 220). Woolf gestures towards its future successful displacement²⁴, but the ‘male universal’ continues to ‘wear the mask of human experience’ (Kitch 1987: 9) in her understanding of art and writing. And consequently, the experience of motherhood, with its concomitant responsibilities and emotional–psychological baggage, its interruptions and dramas and unpredictabilities, has no place in Woolf’s thinking, as it has no place in the androcentric construct that informs her thinking. Motherhood is a real and tangible commitment that requires a woman to be *in the world* at all times, attentive to the needs of others as and when they arise, whereas, according to Woolf (1977: 50), an artist is an otherworldly creature:

[T]he mind of an artist, in order to achieve the prodigious effort of freeing whole and entire the work that is in him, must be incandescent, like Shakespeare’s mind... There must be no obstacle, no foreign matter unconsumed.

²³ The women writers Woolf includes as historical examples in *A Room of One’s Own*, beginning with Restoration dramatist Aphra Behn, are all childless — Jane Austen, George Eliot, Charlotte and Emily Brontë: none had children, and nor did the ‘noble’ lesser-knowns she refers to: Lady Winchelsea and the ‘hare-brained, fantastical’ Margaret of Newcastle (1977: 59).

²⁴ Paul Fry (2012: 265) writes: ‘Although it is possible to criticize *A Room of One’s Own* on such grounds [as its impatience with ‘tendentiousness’ or complaint in women’s writing and its misjudged solution of creative androgyny], one should recognize at the same time how completely Virginia Woolf’s arguments anticipate the subsequent history of feminist criticism.’

Woolf’s model of excellence, then, remains that of ‘masculine excellence’ (Sandbach-Dahlström 1993: 218) in which the abstract and universal are valourised over the concrete and particular. It follows that, when configuring a set of ideal conditions for the woman writer of the future, Woolf should nominate the same conditions required traditionally by the male artist: solitude, freedom from responsibility and distraction, the right and opportunity to prioritise work above other considerations. Woolf boils these elements down to the two requirements of a fixed income and a room of one’s own. Putting aside the question of an independent income (always helpful for any writer in any age), only a woman without children might comfortably inhabit, for the long periods of time it takes to construct a work of art, ‘a room with a lock on the door’ (1977: 100). For the writer who is also a mother, Woolf’s ‘locked door’ is a vexed, if not impossible, proposition: a space that bars her from her children and her children from her. She might inhabit such a space, but not with an untroubled mind.

BOOKS VS BABIES OR THE MENOPAUSAL THEORY OF THE FEMALE WRITER

The century into which she was born supported, in theory and in practice, Woolf’s omission of the mother from the field of creative work. ‘[T]he Victorian script calls for a clear choice — either books or babies for a woman, but not both’, writes Le Guin (1992: 218). As accepted wisdom, this ‘script’ accommodated single, childless, or child-free (ie middle-aged and older) women in literature, but only because the inclusion of such women did not require a substantial amendment to the central narrative of the androcentric myth nor even much adjustment of its terms²⁵. And even for those women who *did* choose ‘books’ over ‘babies’, no correlative social acceptance was forthcoming: a single, childless woman writer remained a suspect figure in 19th century society. Susan Suleiman (1985: 358) calls the ‘books versus babies’ theory ‘the menopausal theory of artistic creation’ because the group of

²⁵ Furthermore, it was only in the ‘safe’ field of the novel that nineteenth century women writers were sanctioned to exercise their literary talents. (See Showalter 2009 pp. 68–9.)

women writers it socially sanctioned were those who had dutifully fulfilled their child-raising duties *prior* to embarking on a literary career:

Victorian critics were on the whole more kind to women writers who were mothers than to their childless sisters, but with the clear understanding that ‘mothers must not dream of activity beyond the domestic sphere until their families are grown’ (Suleiman 1985: 359, in part quoting Showalter).

Even the prolific, influential novelist and mother-of-four Elizabeth Gaskell (although increasingly ‘proto-feminist’, or ‘tendentious’, in her later works [Fry 2012: 268]) acceded to, and was an example of, this theory: Gaskell’s first novel was not published until she was 38 and her children had been well and truly ‘raised’. The ‘menopausal’ mother-writer, à la Gaskell, had prioritised and prioritised correctly, adopting the one-at-a-time rule that the androcentric myth demanded.²⁶ It’s interesting to note, however, that whilst advocating this model of writing practice for women, Gaskell was also emphatic that the experience of being a mother would enrich the subsequent work: ‘[Y]ou will write ten times as good a novel as you could do now, just because you will have been through so much more of the interests of a wife and mother’ (Gaskell quoted in Showalter 2009: 58).

The advent of psychoanalysis drew the ‘menopausal theory’ of female creativity into the twentieth century, putting an authoritative ‘scientific’ stamp on what had previously been a matter of social consensus. In 1945, not long before the publication of de Beauvoir’s *The Second Sex*, Polish feminist Helene Deutsch wrote:

The urge to intellectual and artistic creation and the productivity of motherhood spring from common sources, and *it seems very natural that one should be capable of replacing the other...* A motherly woman can give up her other interests in favor of the reproductive function, and she returns to the former when she feels the biologic restriction approaching (Deutsch quoted in Suleiman 1985: 358, Suleiman’s emphases).

The phenomenon of the *childless* woman-writer could also be better explained in terms of this psychological ‘law’ (Suleiman 1985: 360²⁷): a single woman’s books clearly compensated for the children she had not borne; they filled a discrete lack, an

²⁶ Interestingly, as shown by Showalter (2009: 39), the majority of women writers up until 1780 were married mothers; between 1800 and 1900, the statistic fell to half.

²⁷ ‘[P]sychoanalysis lent scientific prestige to a widespread cultural prejudice, reinforcing it and elevating it to the status of a “natural” law’ (Suleiman 1985: 360).

inadequacy, in her life. This tendency to see women’s literary achievement as a form of sublimation for motherhood congealed into something close to a cultural truth. The metaphor of the writer ‘giving birth’ to his or her literary works was commonplace in the nineteenth century and prevailed well into the twentieth. In 1963, poet Gwen Harwood, in a moment of uncharacteristic pessimism, writes of her fear that her creative powers will ‘run dry’ when she hits menopause, as though her capacity to bear children is magically linked with her creative ability as a poet (To TR 18.7.63; Kratzmann 2001: 179)²⁸. Woolf herself ‘...succumbs to the conventional on at least one occasion by comparing the final production of a work to childbirth,’ writes Sandbach-Dahlström (1993: 219). In contrast, however, the male writer who considered his books his ‘children’ was not guilty of a comparable sublimation of his needs: by incorporating an idea of ‘mothering’ into his relationship with creativity, the male writer’s ‘metaphorical maternity [became] something *added* to his male qualities’ (Suleiman 1985: 360, original emphases). It seems his was a creative ‘fatherhood’ or even ‘motherhood’ (a male artist was permitted to express his femininity freely and without censure²⁹) quite separate to any paternal responsibilities he faced in the ‘real world’.

The ‘books vs babies’ theory had a significant impact upon women, and is worth deconstructing even now, because it was predicated on an important real-life choice, the residual influence of which has still not been completely shaken off: motherhood or the life of an artist, but never both — or never both at the same time. Originally, the wisdom behind this construction was that if a mother gave her energy — her ‘mothering’ — to her creative work, she would, by extension, rob her children of that

²⁸ Admittedly, Harwood was recovering from the removal of a benign intestinal tumour when she wrote this. Elsewhere, she is positive on the topic of menopause: ‘women seem to have a second flowering in their forties: when the children are no longer eating them alive... We have such an incredibly awful time with the snotties that middle age is more like a harbour than a reef’ (To TR 7.6.60; Kratzmann 2001: 98).

²⁹ Battersby (1989: 107) writes that the nineteenth century androcentric myth of the artist sanctioned traditional ‘female’ traits when manifested by the male artist. She quotes Schopenhauer, who says that, as the genius matures, he ‘transcends the motivational drives that are integral to masculinity and acquires feminine passivity. He belongs to a kind of third sex—the female male’. The male artistic ‘genius’, furthermore, was imagined to have superfluous quantities of ‘female’ traits such as subjectivity, emotionality, and heightened sensitivity — he must possess a kind of nervous susceptibility that bordered, in fact, on hysteria. Note that the obverse was not held to be true. Nor was it feasible that a female artist should manifest the same ultra-female qualities and be dubbed a ‘genius’: a doubling up of femaleness somehow cancelled out the creatively generative qualities of the female element as it worked upon the male psyche.

same energy and nurturing. Seemingly, the two ‘vocations’ — ‘mother’ and ‘writer/artist’ — could not coexist because any creative ambition in a woman correlated proportionally with neglect for her children. Woolf’s insistence on a ‘room of one’s own with a locked door’ (1977: 100) only lent weight to the books versus babies theory (which became known in the twentieth century as ‘the either/or dilemma’ [Suleiman 1985: 125]) for how can a woman writer inhabit freely her own creative space and simultaneously be physically present for her children, to create order, provide comfort, prevent mishap?

The books versus babies theory was a Victorian invention, but Le Guin identifies its continuing relevance — as well as its obvious ludicrousness — as late as 1988:

[F]ew readers would question the assumption that a woman should put family before public responsibility, or that if she does work outside the “private sphere” she will be neglectful of her house, indifferent to the necks of her children, and incompetent to fasten her clothing (1992: 219).

The (perhaps-irrational) experience of what I call ‘motherguilt’ that underscores and perpetuates this notion, even in the face of its obvious lack of logic, is apparent across generations of women, from pre-suffrage to the present day. ‘[T]he mother’s very character, her status as a woman, are in question if she has “failed” her children,’ wrote Adrienne Rich in 1976 (1986: 52)³⁰. It is striking to see how deeply the phenomenon of motherguilt is lodged, across generations, in women artists who otherwise impress with their feminist credentials and accomplishments. In 1922, when her son died of scarlet fever just as her own international literary reputation was cementing, feminist poet Anna Wickham, a contemporary of Woolf’s and an artist of some renown, wrote of her conviction that ‘[her son’s] death was a judgment for letting poetry divert her from her family’ (Vickery 2007: 147). Poet Mary Gilmore, equally political, wrote of her own ‘books versus babies’ crisis:

...I gave up everything for the child. He was nearly six years old before I allowed myself to write more than letters³¹ for fear of in some way robbing him by neglect or want of interest. If I had had a dozen children it wd. have been the same (Mary Gilmore quoted in Vickery 2007: 32).

³⁰ See Literature Review for full Rich quote.

³¹ It is very interesting, in the context of this thesis, that Gilmore excluded letter-writing from her understanding of ‘writing’ here. (See Chapter three, p. 53.)

In 1985 Susan Suleiman wrote of the unspoken recrimination behind a mother-writer’s engagement with her work: ‘ “With every word I write, with every metaphor, with every act of genuine creation, I hurt my child” ’ (374). Anne Aronson, in her 1999 study of mature women students’ writing practices, attests to the ubiquity of motherguilt in her case studies: ‘Paula’s’ only possible work space was in the household basement, but “that wouldn’t work very well,” Paula says, “If the kids woke up I couldn’t hear them very well” ’ (291). Elsewhere:

Carol used to put a “Do Not Disturb” sign up on her door [while she worked], but recently she has put the sign up less frequently because she feels too guilty about closing her children out so forcefully (Aronson 1999: 290).

In the 21st century the phenomenon persists. Writing in 2007, Heike Klippel describes the difficulty women still have of shrugging off the ‘unspoken reproach’ of prioritising creative or intellectual work over caring: ‘[The woman] who already spends her work time with only vaguely understandable activities [poetry, for instance] — such a woman is a *questionable entity*’, she writes (160, my emphases). In 2008, Melbourne writer Martine Murray says: ‘Maybe, it’s that image of the male artist — with that pure, obsessive drive and focus — that says to a woman: “It’s impossible for you because that kind of energy and commitment has to go toward your child” ’ (Martine Murray quoted in Power 2015: 237).

The guilt these writers describe, in the early years of the 20th century, in the 1970s, the 1990s, and the 2000s, is not easy to circumvent because motherhood is more than institution; it is an internalised non-transferable identity: ‘[A]lternate nurturers will not necessarily relieve [the daily conflict and self-doubt of the mother-writer]...because the conflicts are *inside* the mother, they are part of her most fundamental experience,’ wrote Susan Suleiman in 1985 (362, original emphases):

Guilt, desperation, splitting of the self, alienated role playing (“My writing is not serious, don’t be offended by it, just look at my three children”), resignation to lesser accomplishment, renunciation of the writing self — these are some of the realities, some of the possible choices that writing mothers live with.

Women may no longer believe that a complete renunciation of self is required in order to be a good mother, nor that women act ‘exclusively as agents of their *family’s* rational interests, not their own’ (Hirschmann 2010: 11, original emphases).

Nevertheless, motherhood still retains certain moral imperatives that make the call to

‘selfish interest’ a complicated proposition for mother-artists. I would suggest that, for most mother-artists, caring responsibilities will always occupy the higher priority. Writes Gwen Harwood, in 1959, to a friend whose daughter is sick: ‘It must be a sickening worry about Jane. *I can’t do anything if one of the family is sick or in trouble*’ (Kratzmann 2001: 79, my emphases).

Germaine Greer maintains that women artists of past generations have ‘faced... an irreconcilable choice of art or life, and that life, for the woman of the nineteenth to early twentieth century, did not exist outside of marriage; a respectable woman [who pursued art] was denied lovers, children, and even a home of her own’ (Germaine Greer cited in Doumato 1980: 75). By the turn of the century, feminist poets like Anna Wickham, Lesbia Harford, Mary Fullerton, Nettie Palmer and Zora Cross had made motherhood part of their ‘favoured platform’ (Vickery 2007: 144), chronicling in their work the difficulty of balancing creative and family commitments, and overtly bringing personal and everyday experiences into the public sphere through their poetry. So it is surprising that Woolf, writing in 1929, is not more responsive to the vexed, and clearly contemporary, question of whether ‘both forms of creativity [motherhood and art] could be open to [women]’ (Modjeska 1999: 20) without one or the other being ‘damaged’ as a result. On the question of whether a woman writer might conceivably support her family through her writing, Woolf is scathing; of writer Margaret Oliphant, who was sole supporter of both her own children and her nephews, taking whatever literary commissions she could to support them, Woolf, in *Three Guineas* in 1938, says: ‘Mrs Oliphant sold her brain, her very admirable brain, prostituted her culture and enslaved her intellectual liberty in order that she might earn her living and educate her children’ (Woolf quoted in Showalter 2009: 39–40). The responsible mother, it seems, is condemned to inferior literary status.

Catherine Sandbach-Dahlström asserts that ‘Woolf in her critical role is often guilty of the common androcentric device of exclusion or of concealing by omission’ (1993: 220). In *A Room of One’s Own* Woolf does not, for instance, reference those 19th century writers who *did* negotiate motherhood with successful literary careers, such as

the poet Elizabeth Barrett-Browning³² or the above-mentioned Elizabeth Gaskell. None of the women writers she includes as historical examples in *A Room of One's Own* are mothers. Should Austen, Eliot and the Brontës have found themselves together in a room, says Woolf, the only ‘possibly relevant fact’ they had in common was their childlessness (1977: 63). It seems to me a serious omission on Woolf’s part that she does not further investigate this ‘possibly relevant fact’ to find out precisely *how* relevant, or even how *significant*, it might be. But Woolf is brusque in passing over the issue, and avoids exploring it in any detail. While children occasionally feature in the scenarios and examples of domestic life Woolf records, their presence is otherwise only insinuated in the lives of women. A female writer seeking affirmation for her writing ambitions in *A Room of One's Own* will find that childlessness, not motherhood, is the distinctive feature of the female writing life Woolf describes.

Again, although it is tempting to speculate on the further levels of complexity motherhood might have afforded to Woolf’s thinking, it remains that Woolf did not have children of her own³³, and when she imagines women writers, past and future, motherhood does not feature in their experience either³⁴. The solution Woolf finally yields to the problem of ‘women and literature’ — that of ‘creative androgyny’ — is as unaccommodating of the mother-writer as was the androcentric myth that preceded it. This contribution only further reinforced childlessness as an implied third condition for women writers.

³² This is a particularly interesting omission as Woolf’s creative biography of Elizabeth Barrett-Browning, *Flush*, was published in 1933. Incidentally, Barrett-Browning’s famous epic poem *Aurora Leigh*, about a woman writer’s difficulty in pursuing her vocation, was written while Barrett-Browning’s first child was an infant.

³³ Much to Woolf’s disappointment and, it has been contended, distress. The generally accepted interpretation is that the decision was not entirely her own. Elaine Showalter (2009: 223) writes: ‘According to Quentin Bell, Virginia had happily anticipated having children and did not know of Leonard’s misgivings until some time after they married ... In January 1913 Leonard consulted a number of doctors looking, it appears, for someone to lend medical authority to a decision he had already made ... But it was to be a permanent source of grief to her and, in later years, she could never think of Vanessa [Bell]’s fruitful state without misery and envy’. Considering these circumstances, children and motherhood may not have been easy topics for Woolf to examine in her writing. (See also Irene Coates, *Who’s Afraid of Leonard Woolf*, Soho Press, 1998.)

³⁴ I wish here to acknowledge that, without childless women and their creative and intellectual work, it is true that we would have a depleted female literary tradition: ‘Without the unacclaimed research and scholarship of “childless” women, without Charlotte Brontë (who died in her first pregnancy), Margaret Fuller (whose major work was done before her child was born), without George Eliot, Emily Brontë, Emily Dickinson, Christina Rossetti, Virginia Woolf, Simone de Beauvoir — we would all today be suffering from spiritual malnutrition as women’ (Rich 1986: 252). Note that Rich also states vigorously that the construction of ‘mother’ vs. ‘childless woman’ is a ‘false polarity’ (250).

THE CREATIVE ANDROGYNOUS THIRD SEX

Woolf arrives at the theory of creative androgyny as a way to circumvent the androcentric myth of the artist, but it remains as problematic for women artists as the masculinist model of creativity it supplants. It is worth examining how and why Woolf's theory fell short, for such a discussion may provide insights into why motherhood has been so belatedly accounted for in western thinking about creative practice. Elaine Showalter (1992: 208–9) explains Woolf's 'androgyny theory' as follows:

Nagged by the shade of her father, and conscious of the power of male disapproval, Virginia Woolf developed a literary theory which had the effect of neutralizing her own conflict between the desire to present a woman's whole experience, and the fear of such revelation. It is a theory of the androgynous mind and spirit; a fusion of masculine and feminine elements, calm, stable, unimpeded by consciousness of sex or individuality. She meant it to be a luminous and fulfilling symbol, but like most highly principled utopian projections, her vision of the serene androgynous imagination lacks zest and vigor. Whatever else one may say of androgyny, it represents an escape from the confrontation with femininity.

Showalter has been criticised as misinterpreting Woolf's intention here. Nat Trotman (1999: 382) suggests Woolf's interest lay rather in 'breaking down the essentialist notion of masculine/feminine as opposites...[as well as] of various other binary codings: true/false, essay/novel, subjective/objective'. There is much that is persuasive in Trotman's argument; but it remains that motherhood cannot meaningfully exist in a conceptual space marked 'androgynous'. Certainly Woolf intends her use of the term metaphorically (as did Coleridge, whom she cites) to indicate an epicene 'unity of mind' (1977: 94) in which consciousness of sex has been eclipsed by the immersive experience of creative work. But her metaphor spills over into the concrete: 'greatness' might be androgynous in the abstract, but in order for the woman writer to attain it, Woolf says, she must police her real-world femaleness relentlessly: 'It is fatal,' she writes, 'for a woman [writer] to lay the least stress on any grievance; to plead even with justice any cause; *in any way to speak consciously as a woman*' (1977: 99, my emphasis). Woolf's injunction to silence on questions of women's experience extends to the dematerialisation of children. Children are physical facts that bring women hard up against their female difference; a stark

reminder that androgyny might only ever be a metaphorical solution to ‘the great problem of the true nature of woman and the true nature of fiction’ (Woolf 1977: 6).

Whether androgyny is a veiling device or feint, an escape route from or central tenet in Woolf’s thinking, it is not a politically radical invention³⁵. Androgyny, for Woolf, is perhaps best understood as a literary solution that resonated with the times, as well as with her own ‘allegiance with aestheticism’ (Fry 2012: 265) — a gentle hedging of the question, using a concept that had a particular contemporary resonance³⁶.

Certainly, androgyny represents a move away from the androcentric — one step in a more gradual revisionary process — but it is theoretical, metaphorical, intellectual; there is no place within it for the physiological facts of femaleness or the daily experience of motherhood. Restuccia (1985: 262) suggests that Woolf is not prepared, in her own time, to assert the merit of an explicitly female ordering system that starkly ‘values the female as it devalues the male’: ‘Androgyny serves *In A Room of One’s Own* as a curtain draped over the more subversive defense of female difference’. Asserting ‘female difference’ requires more than claiming a woman writer’s equal right to prioritise self-interest over other responsibilities. In subverting androcentric value systems enshrined in literature and culture, and demanding that female experience (including the central experiences of child-bearing and motherhood) occupy the foreground, the values of ‘female difference’ threaten to unravel the cultural fabric that Woolf herself is woven into.

In an essay that insists on material conditions as the keys to women’s success in literature, it is ironic that Woolf relies ultimately on so mysterious and intangible a

³⁵ On the question of Woolf’s radicalism: to what extent Woolf was in sympathy with the suffrage movement has been treated of in depth elsewhere and is not relevant to the discussion here. However, it is interesting to note that Woolf described herself, famously, as ‘a benevolent spectator’ of the women’s movement (Woolf quoted in Park 2005: 120). In *Three Guineas* (1938) she went so far as to disown the word ‘feminist’: ‘Let us write that word in large black letters on a sheet of foolscap; then solemnly apply a match to the paper’ (Woolf quoted in Park 2005: 126). (See Sowon S. Park for further discussion of Woolf’s involvement and identification with the suffrage movement, as well as an interesting account of the times themselves.)

³⁶ Lisa Rado (1997: 149) says that, if understood in Woolf’s time, her androgyny theory could certainly be considered an ‘emancipatory strategy’ and that androgyny ‘signified something vastly different in the 1920s and 1930s than it did in the 1970s or 1990s’. She goes on to account for European sex theories that were influencing in a specific way the contemporary understanding of the term ‘androgyny’, including that androgyny constituted a discrete third sex and enabled creative, ideologically ‘free’ thinking, ‘free[ing] individuals from the oppressiveness of patriarchal norms...’ This idea of androgyny was closely tied to concepts of homosexuality and hermaphroditism.

notion as androgyny. The androgynous writer — sexless, childless, without domestic responsibility — has no difficulty ‘locking the door’ of his/her devoted writing space. ‘The problem with Woolf’s [androgyny] strategy,’ writes Lisa Rado (1997: 149), ‘is ironically that it achieves its result: the empowerment it is designed to produce is predicated on the repression of her own female identity, her own female body’. For the women writers who followed her, Woolf’s androgyny theory fell short of validating lived female experience. In encouraging androgyny as creative model, Woolf encouraged women writers only ‘to transcend consciousness of their sex, certainly not to write about it’ (Showalter 1992: 215). Indeed, Woolf’s androgyny model supports the damaging notion that continued into the latter half of the twentieth century: that ‘[t]he highest praise a woman writer could expect was to be absolved from being a “woman writer” ’ (Showalter 1992: 215).

As a theory of creativity, androgyny does not substantially challenge androcentrism, but rather annexes space for women within it. While allowing women to claim neutral rights to ‘greatness’ in the abstract, androgyny otherwise merely enables women to ‘occupy the masculine subject position’ (Sandbach-Dahlström 1993: 222) as a quasi-male, excising those aspects of femaleness that do not fit. Woolf’s ‘androgynous’ writer remains childless, emotionally unencumbered, responsible only to the work. In effect, *A Room of One’s Own* champions a woman’s right to enact her capacity for self interest according to the existing terms of the artist-hero myth. This offering unfortunately perpetuates the notion that mothering, if not frankly incompatible with creativity, is unlikely to be beneficial.

In the next chapter I will begin to imagine what a female-centric writing practice might look like, using correspondence as an exemplar. I will look at female tradition in writing, and consider the dialogues that attest to and enshrine female value systems, and enable the practice of ‘writing in the midst of life’ (Aronson 2007: 283). This will hopefully enable a radically different idea of artistic practice to emerge, in which mothering can be seen to both benefit creativity and, potentially, to subvert the remnants of the androcentric myth that continue to cleave to western thinking about art and the artist. Accordingly, I conceptualise a new ground-breaking template for creative practice that not only accommodates but integrates motherhood.

Chapter Three: Correspondence: a female-centric writing practice

The duties of motherhood cannot radically change, but the way we apprehend the conditions in which creative work is produced can. As I hope I have demonstrated, androcentric thinking about art and ‘genius’ has remained tenacious in the 20th century, facilitated in certain ways by formative feminist thinkers like Woolf and de Beauvoir; furthermore, it continues residually and subconsciously to inform western thinking about what ‘great’ art is and how it is achieved. Androcentrism in art has not been replaced by, or transformed into, a conceptual model of creative practice that foregrounds women’s realities and enables, or promotes, the integration of motherhood and art. In the 21st century, a female-centric model of creativity has yet to be fully imagined, let alone find wide acceptance as equally valid to the androcentric tradition.

In 1929, Virginia Woolf began the discussion of what a woman’s sentence, a woman’s poetry, a woman’s book might look like, admitting that she was raising ‘difficult questions that lie in the twilight of the future’ (74). Nearly sixty years later, in 1987, Sally Kitch asked: ‘If a woman writes from her gendered perspective, either within or without the conventions and exigencies of literary tradition, what characterizes her work?’ (Kitch 1987: 7) I maintain that neither Woolf’s nor Kitch’s questions have yet been answered. In this chapter, I will explore correspondence as a model of writing that contains within it, readymade, many of the characteristics identified by gynocriticism as crucial to a female-centric literary practice — characteristics that inherently subvert androcentrism by reconfiguring or overturning conventional value systems and tropes about the making of literature and art. Importantly, and in answer to Woolf’s still highly influential *A Room of One’s Own*, I will investigate correspondence as a ‘writing form’³⁷ that does not insist upon seclusion — a ‘room of one’s own’ — and thus does not require a woman to make a practical daily choice between motherhood and creativity. If ‘identifying with the artist often meant alienation from the woman,’ as Showalter puts it (1993: 121), I will suggest that the

³⁷ I deliberately use the term ‘writing form’ rather than ‘literary form’ here to underscore that correspondence exists outside what Showalter calls the ‘hierarchy of genre’ (1981: 203). (See Literature Review.)

practice of correspondence necessitates no such alienation, in part because it does not heed androcentric notions about art and so does not position female experience as peripheral.

If it is agreed that privileging a language that foregrounds ‘authority of experience’ (Showalter 1981: 181) over the androcentric ‘language of authority’ (Tompkins 1987: 175) — or at least claiming the equal validity of both ‘authorities’ — is crucial in bringing about feminist transformation in scholarly and literary contexts, I suggest that the ‘authority of experience’ is honoured in correspondence in a way it is not in other forms or genres of writing. As the editor of her collected letters, Gregory Kratzmann, wrote of poet Gwen Harwood’s correspondence, it was centred around her daily experience as mother and ‘housewife’³⁸, foregrounding rather than invisibilising domesticity:

She wrote letters quickly and with great facility, often when she was surrounded by domestic activity...sometimes three or more long letters in the same day...the activity of writing was an essential part of living; at times the writing of letters was a compulsion, a necessary escape from the various roles she played as wife, mother, secretary, and, later, public figure and committee woman... Even some of the most deeply personal and reflective of the letters, including those in which she writes about the challenges and the delights of literature, music, art and philosophy, have a strongly domestic, quotidian focus; they are full of news about the children, food, and ‘scenes overheard’ (Kratzmann 2001: xvi–xvii).

For Harwood, in her letters at least, ‘life’ as it occurs around her is the substance of the writing — not the excess, or overflow, or material to be left out as insufficiently important.

Gynocriticism’s insistence on the importance of tradition — of finding a model for women writers that demonstrates continuity of practice across generations — is also validated in the practice of correspondence. Woolf’s call to identify a female writing tradition, to ‘think back through our mothers’ (1977: 72), a rallying cry in feminist literary theory, is clearly satisfied by the deceptively humble practice of ‘letter-writing’. So long as they were literate, women have always written letters as an essential form of communication and self-expression, and they have done so without disturbing the status quo or conflicting with domestic or mothering responsibilities. Traditionally, women were able, in letters, to discuss experiences not deemed worthy of expression in higher literary forms. Nor did they need to consciously conceive of themselves as ‘writers’ in order to be avid *letter*-writers. Individual ambition and artistic

³⁸ I put the term ‘housewife’ in quotes here as Harwood herself used this term ironically and, I believe, politically to highlight the pejorative nature of the term.

achievement, so integral to the androcentric tradition, were not consciously, centrally, at play in this writing practice. Indeed, it is only the androcentric insistence on self-conscious artistic purpose that makes such purpose an essential ingredient of creative accomplishment.

Certainly correspondence remains outside of the literary hierarchies that connote value, but it seems to me to provide the very *tradition* of female literary practice that both Woolf and her feminist successors considered so important to identify and sustain: it is a pragmatic, documentable, and democratic tradition of writing that is anti- ‘context-stripping’ (Donovan 1984: 106), and does not demand seclusion as a pre-condition. Motherhood can both coexist alongside the writing of correspondence and directly inform its shape and content.

Furthermore, correspondence, unlike a diary, has an intended audience: it is conceived of as dialogue, not monologue; it is one side of a two-sided conversation and as such is responsive to the reader in a way that the diary is not. Like a published work, it is intended to communicate beyond the self, but its difference is that it has traditionally provided a space in which women might relate their daily lived experiences.

In order to separate out and investigate these notions, I have divided Chapter three into several short ‘mini-chapters’, containing within them sub-sections. These ‘mini-chapters’ are as follows: 1) Correspondence: a robust tradition; 2) Writing in the midst of life; 3) Female-centric literary values; and 4) The values of motherhood. Some of the discussion will necessarily overlap across what are, essentially, artificial distinctions.

CORRESPONDENCE: A ROBUST TRADITION

The epigraph that prefaces this thesis comes from Virginia Woolf. In her curiously prescient way, Woolf seems to have intuited something important about letter-writing and women, even if she never clearly articulated it or made it the pillar of any particular argument. It’s perhaps even possible to say that the female writing tradition she was seeking lay before her, unrecognised, the whole time. The very first lines of *Jacob’s Room*, for instance, show a woman writing, not a book, but a letter. It’s not a *very important* woman — ‘It’s only Betty Flanders, and she’s only writing a letter’ (Woolf in Le Guin 1992: 213) — presumably there is no ‘great artistic composition’ in progress, or at least not consciously, but there she is, doing it. And she sits not at a desk in a room of her own but ‘on the shore, by the sea, outdoors’ (Le Guin 1992: 213). Of this world into which Woolf invites us, Le Guin remarks, ‘[T]he first thing one sees is a woman, a

mother of children, writing’ (1992: 213, my emphases). One might imagine poet Gwen Harwood, with her brood of four young children, writing *en plein air* in this fashion: composing poems, or notes for poems, or writing letters, perched on a rock, or with her back to a sand dune, while her children wade and collect shells or stones. Certainly her poetry indicates direct observation of such scenes: ‘Children and running water run/Beside me in the flawless sun/Unheeding, to their distant grace. Rest, and let the water wear/ Light’s blue veil on its changing face’ (from ‘Sunday’ 1961; Hoddinott & Kratzmann 2003: 114). In the opening scene of *Jacob’s Room*, and in the life of Gwen Harwood, we see mothers who are able to both write and attend to their children, without ‘injury’ accruing to either occupation. Sometimes, presumably, the mother-writer might have to put down her notebook to attend to feet cut on sea-shells or rocks, or to negotiate rows and deliver instructions. But, in spite of Stravinsky’s opinions on the subject (see above p. 25), being interrupted is not so terrible nor so damaging to artistic production as we might think. Speaking of the baby in Margaret Drabble’s 1965 novel *The Millstone*, who does not merely interrupt the writing of her mother’s manuscript, but *eats* portions of it, Le Guin says: ‘[I]t is terrible, but not *very terrible*’ (1992: 230, my emphases)³⁹. This is, for me, an ‘emperor’s new clothes’ moment: it effortlessly deflates the entire androcentric posture, revealing it as self-dramatising and even, perhaps, unworkably fragile. The mother-writer’s creative practice, in contrast, must be robust enough to endure the ‘terrible’ frustrations and demands of children. If interrupted, inspiration cannot simply wither and disappear. The distraction of small voices at lunchtime does not spell calamity to the creative process. A baby’s chewing up of manuscript pages is only temporarily tragic. (I will discuss ‘interruptibility’ further in CORRESPONDENCE AND THE VALUES OF MOTHERHOOD below.)

This is not to say that there ought never to be conflict between motherhood and writing, but only that such conflict need not be considered ‘terrible’ — it is only androcentric thinking that has us believe that being interrupted signals the death, or flight, of the creative ‘muse’. This notion has not, however, impinged upon women’s writing of letters, firstly because letter-writing has always been flexible enough to accommodate the stop-

³⁹ Le Guin’s full quote is too delightful for me to omit: ‘[T]he point of it, or part of it, is that babies eat manuscripts. They really do. The poem not written because the baby cried, the novel put aside because of a pregnancy, and so on. Babies eat books. But they spit out wads of them that can be taped back together; and they are only babies for a couple of years, while writers live for decades; and it is terrible, but not very terrible’ (1992: 230).

start demands of motherhood; and secondly, because correspondence-writers have not traditionally aspired to literary virtuosity (though letter-writing has, of course, provided a fruitful testing ground for experimentation with style, expression and language etc). The fact that Gwen Harwood was able to compose poetry and large quantities of correspondence throughout her active child-rearing years, without calling on nannies or neglecting her children or being viewed suspiciously in 1950s Australia, is testament to the enduring tradition that correspondence has provided for women writers. Within this tradition, women have been able to combine mothering and writing activities without the internal conflicts or psychological guilt induced by androcentric beliefs and expectations. When self-consciously composing ‘literature’, however, the conflicts emerge at once, seemingly unbidden (see Mary Gilmore quote above, p. 42).

Motherhood, of course, has its own age-old laments that ought not to be pretended out of existence: it is tiring, relentless, demanding work, both physically and emotionally. With four children close in age, Harwood sometimes felt this starkly:⁴⁰

I wish I could wake one morning and not have to do anything: I’d like to be put on a rug in the park with a couple of dirty big pies and a jam tart and left to soak in the spring: no children, no housework, no grocers knocking with pencils poised over order books... (To TR 11.9.61; Kratzmann 2001: 139).

Or, more bleakly:

There is something about getting up in the cold darkness and cutting school lunches that saps my living spirit (To TR 23.6.61; Kratzmann 2001: 123).

At home with her four children while her husband worked, Harwood sometimes writes of mothering with a (comic) violence that is almost shocking, even to a modern audience: ‘No I can’t come over with Bill; I have no freezer to put the children in...we have *so few* friends we can’t afford to lose them by parking the atom-age brats’ (To ET 7.4.60; Kratzmann 2001: 92, original emphases).

In her correspondence, we see Harwood use irony to leaven her frustrations. Yet her ambivalent feelings about motherhood also give her correspondence an energy — a quality of ‘boiling-over’ — without which it might be less vivid and dynamic. Her

⁴⁰ Consider also such lines as the following, from Harwood’s 1963 poem ‘In the Park’ in which she relates a chance encounter with, presumably, an old beau: ‘They stand awhile in flickering light, rehearsing/the children’s names and birthdays. “It’s so sweet/to hear their chatter, watch them grow and thrive,”/she says to his departing smile. Then, nursing/the youngest child, sits staring at her feet./To the wind she says, “They have eaten me alive” (Hoddinott & Kratzmann 2003: 65).

weariness might press upon her, but through it she creates the vivid image of herself, essentially ‘put out to pasture’, propped on a rug to soak up the spring rain and consume an eternity of pies. She similarly harvests the experiences of child-birth and child-rearing to amuse her correspondents, describing herself as a ‘Stakhanovite of reproduction’ (2001: 44), having had four children in swift succession, and composing passages like the following, with its brilliantly taut comic pacing and visual hilarity:

Before the twins’ birth I was ordered to bed and had to send hurriedly for Agnes who had planned a leisurely trip by boat a month later. She arrived by rocket plane within 24 hours looking like a duchess, shedding bags of shortbread, home-grown tomatoes and toys for the children and incredible array of baby wear over the room where I lay helpless. She seems to live only for the children — every article in a shop is a suitable or unsuitable gift for them, every item of food is a wholesome or harmful article in their diet, and every house a possible or impossible dwelling for a family of our proportions (To TR 23.11.52; Kratzmann 2001: 44).

Even when there are acute emotions at work there is a comic relish in Harwood’s iterations of birth and motherhood. She does not spare others; nor does she spare herself. In fact, she divests herself of resentment, and possibly of pain, by deploying ‘quotidian’ domestic comedy in her letters:

... [Major William Lloyd-Jones] loved my long hair — always referring to it as ‘your tresses’ and was disappointed when I had it cut off because I was unable to bear the thought of another baby entangling it with porridge and marmite, or snatching it down when I had dressed it on top of my head. I shall always remember his wife, a very beautiful woman much younger than himself, with gratitude because when my second baby was stillborn and I was feeling poisoned by the reptilian sweetness of females who called to try and pry out of me the grim obstetrical details, she appeared at my door in her oldest clothes and said not a word of sympathy but: ‘My dear, I’ve come to char for you’ (To TR 4.9.53; Kratzmann 2001: 45).

The emotions and experiences registered in Harwood’s correspondence are the emotions and experiences that are invisibilised, or trivialised, by the androcentric tradition. As Adrienne Rich (1986: 11) observes: ‘We know more about the air we breathe, the seas we travel, than about the nature and meaning of motherhood’. In correspondence we are, at least, provided an unmediated glimpse of this experience, so central in the lives of so many women. However — and I think this important — correspondence is written and read according to traditional conventions understood by *both* men and women. Because it

does not require the gaining of new ‘interpretive reading strategies’ (Kolodny 1980: 12)⁴¹ in order to be universally comprehended, it avoids androcentric literary expectations but does not, in the process, alienate male readers. Men, as well as women, understand what it is to read and write letters. Further, correspondence-writing has never been a culturally proscribed activity for women; it has never been considered ‘inappropriate’ as have other more apparently literary writing pursuits; it has not threatened the status quo by taking women away from their families or perceived social duties and isolating them in rooms to work on their ‘masterpieces’. Quietly, (apparently) benignly, women have for centuries been able to refine and experiment with their writing practice under the guise of merely ‘writing a letter’. In the next section I will explore the ways in which correspondence-writing validated women’s experience, including their experience of motherhood, in a way that an androcentric writing tradition could not: by allowing women to write *of* their lives from *within* their lives.

WRITING IN THE MIDST OF LIFE

Domestic life made visible

Correspondence lends itself to the personal; like a diary, it can function as a ‘chronicle of [one’s] hours and days’ (Tompkins 1987: 173). But because it is, in essence, a communication to a third party, it must be sensitive to the recipient, the reader, in ways a diary need not. However, as in a diary, the daily and particular are allowed to be present in correspondence and this is perhaps what makes it so startlingly fresh and vivid to read. Decades or even centuries after it is written, upon reading it we are transported into the present tense of a single day in time. In Gwen Harwood’s correspondence there are a myriad such moments; they might seem insignificant, anecdotal, but they bring to life Harwood’s day as she experiences it, as well as throw light on the (constantly changing) texture and moods of motherhood itself⁴²:

⁴¹ To contextualise Kolodny: ‘What we ... choose to read—and, by extension, teach and thereby “canonize”—usually follows upon our previous reading. Radical breaks are tiring, demanding, uncomfortable, and sometimes wholly beyond our comprehension. Though the argument is not usually couched in precisely these terms, a considerable segment of the most recent feminist rereadings of women writers allows the conclusion that, where those authors have dropped out of sight, the reason may be due not to any lack of merit in the work but, instead, to *an incapacity of predominantly male readers to properly interpret and appreciate women’s texts—due, in large part, to a lack of prior acquaintance*’ (1980: 12, my emphases).

⁴² They also reveal the type of mother (and person) she was: the sort who would allow her children to subvert the normal order of the breadloaf!

The infants are reasonably quiet, having been given crusts to munch. We all, even Baby Mary, prefer crusts to bread and by the time I have cut off a bit of crust for everyone the loaf is a sorry affair (To TR 4.9.53; Kratzmann 2001: 45).

As I got on the train with Chris and the twins after school one day, a middle-aged woman moved to make room for us. As I settled in under the heap of children she purred, ‘What beautiful children,’ but not softly enough; that whispered phrase woke the legion of sleeping devils: Peter dealt Chris a terrific kick on the shin; Chris let out a howl of rage and struck Peter on the shoulder. Mary slapped out wildly at the boys. I hastily confined as many arms of the composite monster as I could. The woman stared for a moment and amended her remark to, ‘I mean, it’s nice to see them with all their faculties.’ She said it in a tone that clearly implied nothing else could be said in their favour (To TR 14.3.61; Kratzmann 2001: 54).

Again, Harwood is able to create a sparkling rendition of an apparently mundane moment in a day — a moment, furthermore, that does not cast her or her children in a particularly flattering light. She makes similarly ironic quips about mothering and the social duties it foists upon her elsewhere:

I feel exhausted by winter & its attendant ills and would like to sleep in a cave, or anywhere, for a week without having to speak to anyone; instead, I am pestered by committee-ladies wanting me to knit sparrow-holders and crow-comforters for a fair (To VB 16.8.62; Kratzmann 2001: 164).

There is creative precision at work in the way Harwood relates her daily domestic experiences here: the ‘composite monster’ asleep on a tram; the hacked-at loaf of crustless bread; the small useless knitted objects she refers to as ‘sparrow-holders’ and ‘crow-comforters’. These are crafted poetic images, no less literary because they occur in correspondence and are about domestic life.

Correspondence, I suggest, has always allowed women to write from the *inside* of motherhood and domesticity in this way. As can be seen in Harwood’s letters, the ephemera of the day, the small stories and experiences that might otherwise be lost, are instead caught, transfixed: turned into powerful little time capsules. Nowhere else in literature is the daily fare of a woman’s life given space quite like this. In the androcentric literary tradition — in a traditional novel, for instance — such incidents are only included if a larger narrative or thematic purpose justifies their inclusion. Yet these apparently unimportant exchanges and encounters of the day are in fact the material of ongoing, unfolding experience; they *are* life, not an aside to it. The same is true of motherhood

itself, the details of which, though traditionally banished from centre-stage, are the very *stuff* of life. As Ursula Le Guin (1992: 235) says, ‘To have and bring up kids is about as immersed in life as you can be’.

Mother tongue vs father tongue

In this way, the novel, as a literary form, has traditionally been inadequate for the expression of women’s, and particularly mothers’, experience, in spite of the success many women writers have had with it. The traditional novel does not naturally, inherently, provide an opportunity to ‘reorganise culture from a woman’s point of view’ (Tompkins quoted in Showalter 1993: 119⁴³): the novel’s traditional narrative structure precludes the ephemeral, the habitual, the incidental, in favour of taut purposeful incident, dramatic tension and climax, clean resolution. The experience of motherhood, its pacing to the needs of another human — for ‘[c]hildren grow up, not in a smooth ascending curve, but jaggedly, their needs inconstant as weather’ (Rich 1986: 37) — does not lend itself well to the dramatic arc of the narrative drama. In a traditional androcentrically structured novel, a mother-character cannot be dashing away at inopportune moments to attend to her children; and nor can the mother-writer who is penning such a work, whose door must apparently be locked from the unpredictable needs of others. Quoting author and academic Elizabeth Ammons, Showalter (1993: 122–23) writes: ‘Conventional narrative structures ... are not gender free; they privilege linear, climactic, asymmetric stories that emphasize “separation and aggression...rather than connection or independence”’. She continues:

As the “big” form, the novel carried the psychic weight of the male literary tradition. It forced women to come up with conventional plots and endings that violated their personal experience and demanded a commitment of time many could not manage.

Generally speaking, women’s experience is not that life accelerates towards climax and resolution as the novel conspires to have us believe; it is that life experience accretes, dissolves, resumes, repeats. It is not purposeful or finite or neat. Happy endings are the beginnings of other stories that remain untold, backstage, or in the wings. The traditional

⁴³ Showalter is here quoting Jane Tompkins’ celebration of Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* ‘as “the most dazzling exemplar” of the popular domestic novel, a genre that represented “a monumental effort to reorganize culture from the woman’s point of view”’ (Showalter 1993: 119). I recognise I have taken this quote slightly out of context, but not, I trust, skewed its meaning unacceptably.

novel, in other words, does not adequately express or represent women’s experience of life. Virginia Woolf too remarked on this: as a *young* literary form, she wrote in 1929, the novel might prove to be ‘soft’ in a woman’s hands — by which one presumes she means malleable, capable of being shaped, as-yet-undefined. But she back-pedals fairly swiftly: ‘Yet who shall say that even now “the novel” (I give it inverted commas to mark my sense of the words’ inadequacy), who shall say that even this most pliable of all forms is rightly shaped for [a woman’s] use?’ (1977: 74) Even at its most experimental and original (and I think both epithets apply to Woolf’s novels), the novel is less malleable for women’s purposes because a novel is a self-consciously *crafted* construction that *omits* and *includes* in the process of creating, at all costs, a drama in which events are given more or less time and weight depending on their thematic and narrative significance. A hierarchy of events, and an androcentric *valuing* of events, is at work in the traditional novel in a way it is not in correspondence.

As a literary form, correspondence, it seems to me, is innately ‘soft’ and ‘pliable’; it has remained free of the literary scrutiny that might have hardened it into a more rigid or prescriptive form. Instead, it remains one of the few writing forms that allows the mind of the writer to roam freely, independently, and yet actively *connect* with an attentive, and presumably sympathetic, reader. It also allows women to use what Le Guin calls the ‘mother tongue’; a way of speaking and writing that invokes intimacy, proximity, connectivity, and ‘expects an answer’ (Le Guin in Tompkins 1987: 173). This stands in stark contrast to the ‘father tongue’ we all learn to speak if we wish to operate in culture, in academia, in public life: ‘the language of thought that seeks objectivity [and whose] essential gesture... is not reasoning, but distancing — making a gap, a space, between the subject or self and the object or other’ (Le Guin quoted in Tompkins 1987: 173). The ‘father tongue’ is a language ‘without personal encounter’ (Showalter 1979: npn); it is not the language of reciprocity, not the language with which women speak to each other or to their children — it belies rather than encapsulates female experience. When Jane Tompkins (1987) describes this language in her own scholarly writing, she uses restrictive metaphors: the ‘father tongue’ is a ‘screen’ (174), a ‘straitjacket’ (175), a form of literary corsetry as oppressive psychologically as that which crushes physically: ‘I can’t strap myself psychically into an apparatus that will produce the right gestures when

I begin to move,’ she writes (1987: 178)⁴⁴. No matter how adept we become at it, assuming this language means, for women, donning the mantel of androcentrism, even revoking our better judgement. I do it now, as I write, straining to create objective distance from my personal experience of my subject, and yet maintaining the conventions of academic writing that (still) prevail. In correspondence, however, women are allowed to exist ‘in their own right’ (Tompkins 1987: 177), to leave behind the father tongue and communicate with ‘fluidity, flexibility, versatility, mobility’; to move ‘from one thing to another without embarrassment’ (Tompkins 1987: 174), to write so that we might create and sustain relationships, rather than pretend there is no human being behind the pen. One notices in correspondence that even the rhetorical devices of transition, the elegant segues that smooth a jagged change of subject, are largely dispensed with. No one, writing a letter, agonises over the parsing of a sentence that links two paragraphs. We are not forming an argument when we write a letter, or not usually — not unless it is a formal letter, a business letter, a letter seeking funds or position or influence: a letter that engages directly with the androcentric world. Generally speaking, correspondence *corresponds* with the ways we actually interact with people, and with the spontaneities of speech; it connects us to the mother tongue:

Its power is not in dividing but in binding... We all know it by heart. John have you got your umbrella I think it’s going to rain. Can you come play with me? If I told you once I told you a hundred times.... O what am I going to do?... Pass the soy sauce please. Oh, shit.... You look like what the cat dragged in... (Le Guin quoted in Tompkins 1987: 174).

As well as providing space for the ‘mother tongue’ to be employed and heard, correspondence also allows the breaking down of the androcentric hierarchy of what is worth writing about and what is not. The subjects close to motherhood are validated in correspondence, where the mother tongue is a legitimate recognised language between women (and between men and women). Consider the following extract from Gwen Harwood, in which her anguish about literary recognition is neutralised, or put clearly into perspective, by what seems to us infinitely more alive and important and immediate — her son’s obsession with birds:

...[Y]ou are wrong in imagining that I don’t doubt my own talent; I am continually in doubt about what I write, especially as I reflect that if people don’t like what I’ve done (and on the whole they DON’T) I might as well

⁴⁴ Showalter (1979: npn) describes the notion of academic ‘rigor’ similarly: ‘[M]y dictionary defines [rigor] as strictness, a severe or cruel act, or a “state of rigidity in living tissues or organs that prevents response to stimuli”’.

clean the windows. But it’s easy to feel like this in Australia when one’s ‘papers’ consist largely of rejection slips. The children’s natural enthusiasm is a great contrast to these middle-aged elegiac notes. Chris is absolutely crackers about birds; he refers to ordinary blackbirds as ‘herbivorous birds with a one-foot wingspan’, which impresses the twins greatly. He sees (now he has glasses) and identifies moving spots in the heavens as lesser black-banded this and that, corrects every casual statement about the habits of any bird, and maintains that wedge-tailed eagles fly past his window shortly after dawn. Perhaps his glasses are *too* powerful! John has learnt everything but arithmetic from his adored form-master, whose opinions are produced on all possible occasions as John’s own; parents are tried in the balance and found wanting... (To TR 25.9.58; Kratzmann 2001: 64).

What is profound and enduring in this extract is not the sting of literary rejection, nor Harwood’s commentary on the small-mindedness of the Australian literary world, but her sharing of her sons’ experiences as young curious beings at large in a fascinating, unfolding world. The importance of a poem’s publication is outweighed here, where androcentric value systems do not operate authoritatively to arrange and reconstitute the events of life. Instead, a mother’s values reign supreme, and are recognised by the reader, I think, as philosophically superior.

The common sitting-room

What is perhaps both most revelatory and most commonplace about the practice of correspondence is its capacity to be undertaken, not in a place of seclusion and quiet, but in the actual physical midst — the ‘racket’ — of family life. The tradition of women writing in ‘the common sitting-room’, while life played out around them, was identified by Woolf in *A Room of One’s Own*:

...the middle-class family in the nineteenth century was possessed only of a single sitting-room between them[.] If a woman wrote, she would have to write in the common sitting-room. And, as Miss Nightingale was so vehemently to complain, – ‘women never have half an hour... that they can call their own’ – she was always interrupted ... Jane Austen wrote like this to the end of her days. ‘How she was able to effect all this’, her nephew writes in his Memoir, ‘is surprising, for she had no separate study to repair to, and most of the work must have been done in the general sitting-room, subject to all kinds of casual interruptions’ ... Then, again, all the literary training that a woman had in the early nineteenth century was training in the observation of character, in the analysis of emotion. *Her sensibility had been educated for centuries by the influences of the common sitting-room* (1977: 64, my emphases).

One wonders why Woolf went on to repudiate the common sitting-room in favour of a room of one’s own, when Jane Austen herself — and Woolf was a fan⁴⁵ — did very well without, her writing even profiting as a result. In the context of motherhood, Ursula Le Guin relocates the ‘common sitting-room’ to a more practical and pivotal ‘work space’: the kitchen. Harriet Beecher-Stowe, she tells us, wrote the majority of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, the novel that spearheaded the abolitionist movement in America, ‘at the kitchen table ... getting dinner with the kids all underfoot’ (Le Guin 1992: 220). Although Le Guin goes on to question why it was that Beecher-Stowe’s husband got a room of his own ‘while the woman who wrote the most morally effective American novel of the nineteenth century got the kitchen table’ (1992: 220), indignation at the disparity in male/female writing circumstances is not her point, and is not mine⁴⁶: ‘how’ and ‘why’ Beecher-Stowe managed to write so convincingly and effectively in the midst of tea-time mayhem is what fascinates. Yes, she was interrupted time and time again, and she was tired by domestic duties — ‘weary with teaching the children, and tending the baby, and buying provisions, and mending dresses, and darning stockings’ (Beecher-Stowe quoted in Olsen 2001: 106). It also took her years longer to ‘get to’ her novel than she had intended — she wrote to her husband of her desire to rearrange her domestic life so as to enable time and space for writing, yet when she finally came to writing *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, in instalments for magazine serialisation, its composition seems to have been carried out on that very kitchen table.

Beecher-Stowe’s writing practice goes defiantly ‘against the grain’ of the androcentric myth’s lessons about how ‘great’ and ‘important’ works of literature are produced. Her kitchen-table-writing-practice is, even now, for a modern woman and mother, a liberating concept. When Le Guin (1992: 222) turns her discussion to 19th century writer Margaret Oliphant, another kitchen-table-writer (the same dismissed by Woolf because her writing was commission-based and undertaken to support her children), she makes a further liberating discovery:

⁴⁵ Comparing their use of the ‘male sentence’, Woolf (1977: 72) writes ‘Charlotte Brontë, with all her splendid gift for prose, stumbled and fell with that clumsy weapon in her hands. George Eliot committed atrocities with it that beggar description. Jane Austen looked at it and laughed at it and devised a perfectly natural, shapely sentence proper for her own use and never departed from it’. Elsewhere Woolf says, ‘Jane Austen breaks from melody to melody as Mozart from song to song’ (1977: 77).

⁴⁶ Le Guin’s explanation: ‘The quick feminist-fix answer is that they [women like Beecher-Stowe, who accept second-best conditions] are victims of and/or accomplices with patriarchy, which is true but doesn’t really get us anywhere new...’ (1992: 220).

Oliphant gives us a glimpse of why a novelist might not merely endure writing in the kitchen or the parlour amidst the children and the housework, but might endure it willingly. She seems to feel that she profited, that her writing profited, from the difficult, obscure, chancy connection between the art work and emotional/manual/managerial complex of skills and tasks called “housework,” and that to sever that connection would put the writing itself at risk, would make it, in her word, unnatural.

This statement — that domestic life might beneficially *serve* writing practice — is downright revolutionary. It turns the artist-hero myth on its head, kicks it, and sends it spinning into the dust under that selfsame kitchen-table. Oliphant’s seemingly mild-mannered explanation of her writing practice is in fact a radically transformative way of thinking, both about domesticity and about writing. And yet, if we look at the tradition of women’s correspondence — practised quietly, regularly, for centuries, by women at kitchen tables, parlour tables, common sitting-room tables, and, if they were lucky, desks in rooms of their own — it is not so astonishing at all. Of course women can write and still get the tea on for the children. (Though it would be nice occasionally if someone else would do it for them, of course.)

The prosaic and every-day

Art and life do not have to be separated: this is the lesson to be drawn from mother-writers Margaret Oliphant, Harriet Beecher-Stowe and Gwen Harwood. And, though not a mother, from Jane Austen herself. Art can enrich life, and life can inform art, in mutually reciprocal ways, both of which contribute to the quality of human experience and the quality of the creative work. Gwen Harwood’s correspondence provides abundant examples of how this reciprocity worked in her own life, as well as in the lives of others, examples that are sometimes quite literal:

Did I tell you about Sybille’s kitchen curtains? Tired of gingham, she copied Bach’s Chromatic Fugue (from the Chromatic Fantasia and Fugue) with marking ink on to white cloth, the notes about the size of sixpences, and hung the fascinating curtains in her kitchen — what a marvellous idea, to have something like that around you while dishwashing and peeling potatoes... (To TR 28.11.60; Kratzmann 2001: 112).

This is a beautifully eccentric example of how domesticity and art might be fused, at a prosaic daily level, to enrich each other. As well as a practical way of ameliorating otherwise tedious tasks, Sybille’s curtains function like a little poem, or (in contemporary lingo) an *affirmation* to herself: her ‘washing-up’ is now infused with the reminder of music that is ever-present in her curtains. There is also a spirit of rebellious play in this

creative transformation of her kitchen that Harwood — as poet and musician and playful breaker of conventions herself⁴⁷ — responds to.

Australian writer Patrick White advises a similarly holistic, though rather more sober, approach to the melding of ‘art and life’ when he writes to Harwood’s contemporary, novelist Thea Astley, in 1961:

Read, think & listen to silence, & shell the peas...concentrating on the work in hand until you know what it is to be a pea—and drudge at the school, & sleep with your husband & bring up your child. That is what I mean when I say ‘living’... (White to Astley in Sheridan 2011: 68)

The daily act of ‘living’ mindfully can inform creative work, White seems to be saying: even the mundane work of shelling a pea is an opportunity to be captured by the alert writer. This quality White prescribes of sensory alertness to every-day detail certainly serves a writer (especially, perhaps, a poet) in her quest for precision; for the tactile, closely filed detail that creates the world afresh. He reminds Astley that much of the work of the writer exists in observation and the creative use of otherwise ‘dead time’. Harwood is a literary magician in this respect, conjuring creative opportunities from the seemingly dullest fodder — for instance, the minutes she was obliged to take for a Scout meeting:

At the last Scout meeting the treasurer bet me I couldn’t write the minutes in verse; crazy man, crazy, of course I writ them in verse in the sacred minute book that same night, and at the next meeting will read an account of the Scoutmaster’s doings in ballad metre, and a discussion among members in rhyming pentameter; no feelthy acrostics though⁴⁸ (To VB 17.9.63; Kratzmann 2001: 183).

Elsewhere in her correspondence she tells of making poems from the detritus of her ‘day-at-home-with-the-children’; from her son Bill’s ‘infant word lists’ she constructs the following:

Policeman postman watchman fireman

⁴⁷ As well as submitting her work pseudonymously under several different names (see fn58) and publishing an ‘obscene’ acrostic poem (see fn48) Harwood also wrote parodic verse, incidental comic verse (on such topics as finding a woodlouse in a strawberry) and was known for her ‘Sappho cards’, Victorian and Edwardian illustrations which she re-captioned and sent to friends.

⁴⁸ In 1961, under the pseudonym of Walter Lehman, Harwood submitted and had published in the *Bulletin* a sonnet called ‘Abelard to Eloisa’. It was soon after discovered that the sonnet spelled out the words ‘Fuck All Editors’ when read acrostically. The ‘scandal’ was reported nationally. *The Truth* ran the headline: ‘Tas Housewife in Hoax of Year’. Harwood writes of the fall-out: ‘Bill said after the publicity began that I should have put “Damn all Editors”; but that was too feeble; they might have been able to pretend that they saw the joke. I have got used to the cold eye and pursed lip at the grocer’s; the grocer himself, who knows I can easily transfer my huge account to one of the other local groceries, is perfectly polite’ (To AH & BH 12.9.61; Kratzmann 2001: 139).

airman madman bird man rubbish man
mothers and their gingerbread men
children snowmen

Gone are gone... (To VS 16.12.58; Kratzmann 2001: 66)

In keeping with her mischievous convention-breaking creative sensibility, Harwood here reconstitutes what she hears at home with her children — that is, her young son experimenting with language — as the material for a poem. She might not have sat at her desk to ‘compose’ this small shard of poetry, nor submitted it to *Meanjin* or the *Bulletin* — it is not part of her canonised, anthologised, critically appraised body of work — but she includes it in her correspondence, and it is only in her correspondence that such remnants survive. I think these remnants important: they reveal a quality of living creative attunement we would not otherwise be privy to. And although this short poetic snippet may not be as self-consciously crafted as a poem penned for one of her pseudonymous male European creations⁴⁹, the poem itself contains a vitality, and I think mystery, that marks it clearly as a conscious creative product. It is in her correspondence that we see Harwood experimenting with language in ways that her polished metrically sophisticated poetry doesn’t show us. Furthermore, Harwood is able to demonstrate that the experiences of motherhood are ‘legitimate sources of knowledge’ (Tompkins 1987: 170) for a poet: the babble of children acquiring language is subject matter worth experimenting with, a possible key to new modes of poetic construction. Indeed, the act of poetry-making can be carried out in any engagement with language, however purposeful. To this same correspondent, Vivian Smith, Harwood writes a Christmas missive that is so far from run-of-the-mill season’s greetings, and so full of intoxicating imagery, that it cannot be doubted as a piece of prose poetry:

Dearest Vivian,
I hope this reaches you in time to wish you a very happy Christmas and a wonderful new year full of poetry, lovely spies, absinthe, pernod, fish in whose gullets gold rings abound, oysters crammed with rare black pearls, visions, angelic ministers when you are sad, an abundance of inspiration, beautiful countesses pressing engraved tie-fasteners and other favours on you, rotten floorboards under which you find ineffable mss of Rilke, and inexhaustible joie de vivre (To VS 16.12.58; Kratzmann 2001: 66).

⁴⁹ Harwood ‘played’ with male pseudonyms in her work, demonstrating thereby a continued bias against women in the editorial policies of Australian literature journals. Her poems by Walter Lehmann and Francis Geyer were published, praised, and better remunerated than those she submitted in her own name. (See also fn58.)

Writing from the body

Although I have stated in my Literature Review an intention not to delve into discussion of *écriture féminine* (or French feminist theory generally), in Harwood’s correspondence, as in the tradition of correspondence as a whole, I believe we find an ‘embodied’ poetics at work — ‘embodied’ because the physicality of the author is permitted to be present in the writing; it is not invisibilised or ‘pretended’ out of existence. This is particularly important for mother-writers. The androcentric myth idealises the writer as pure abstract or aesthetic intellect, but for mother-writers an awareness of physical necessity to others remains constant. Pregnancy and breastfeeding assert their own biological demands; children, once arrived, require a mother’s constant physical attention. Rather than motherhood taking women away from the ‘important work’ of art or literature, feminist theorists have recognised that there is, in fact, an intelligence that comes from recognising our connection with our bodies. Adrienne Rich writes:

In order to live a fully human life, we require not only control of our bodies... we must touch the unity and resonance of our physicality, the *corporeal ground of our intelligence* (Rich quoted in Showalter 1981: 188, my emphases).

Correspondence has long enabled women to engage in the battle Virginia Woolf feared ‘no woman had ever won’: the battle to ‘tell the truth about [her] experiences as a body’ (Woolf quoted in Showalter 1992: 207). No other writing form has traditionally, consistently, enabled this. Thus, correspondence provides perhaps one of the very few windows into women’s lived experience and consciousness across generations and, to the extent that literacy has been in place, circumstances. In this way, correspondence can be thought of as a material text, a corporeal text — ‘a text indelibly marked by the body’ (Showalter 1981: 187). It does not pretend that the physical and material experiences of women, as mothers or not, do not exist: it attests to them.

FEMALE-CENTRIC LITERARY VALUES

The ‘ploy’ of scribbling: correspondence as ‘non-writing’

If authorship has been ‘defined in opposition to womanhood’, as suggested by Cynthia Olausen (1993: 87), and as I hope I have demonstrated, what might authorship look like if it were defined ‘through a female prism’? (Auerbach 1984: 155). I am reluctant to idealise the concept of a female-centric writing practice by saying that it does not, or

should not, contain individualist ambition or selfishness. Nor do I put forth the essentialist notion that it would contain, or value, all the things excised from or devalued by the androcentric tradition: on this, I agree with Carolyn Heilbrun (1982: 808) that although women ‘must discover their difference and their own culture ... if women forfeit the culture men have dubbed “male” when it is, in fact, human, they will have deprived themselves of too much’. This point seems worth reprising in the context of my discussion because correspondence might be described as an ‘integrated’ (Auerbach 1984: 155) writing practice in that its conventions are known and shared by both male and female writers⁵⁰. Correspondence-writing and -reading do not demand a radical divergence from androcentric literary conventions, yet simultaneously they naturally lend themselves to the emergence of female-centric value systems.

Carolyn Heilbrun wrote in 1982 that the ‘most dehumanising quality of androcentrism [is] individualistic ambition’ (806). Without engaging in a complex rhetorical analysis of this statement — taking it at face value, and assuming it attends to the androcentric pursuit of individual success over competing responsibilities as discussed in Chapter one — it is fruitful to examine the ways in which correspondence, as writing practice, allows a putting-aside of ‘individualistic ambition’ whilst still enabling individual literary prowess. Because correspondence is not a ‘practiced performance’ (Tompkins 1987: 173) with a finite literary outcome — because it is part of an ongoing unfinished conversation — writers have not traditionally considered their letters part of their literary *oeuvre* (though correspondence might be later collected and published, and might be composed with that future possibility in mind). Gwen Harwood, upon being asked in 1961 to write reviews for poetry editor of *Prospect* Vincent Buckley, responded with: ‘I don’t write prose’ — clearly not counting as ‘prose’ the many pages she produced every week in the form of correspondence (To AH & BH 12.9.61; Kratzmann 2001: 140). While Harwood was, in fact, determinedly ambitious⁵¹, her statement connects with a larger tradition of

⁵⁰ Quoting anthropologist Edward Ardener, Elaine Showalter uses the concept of a ‘muted group’ to describe female-centred culture when it is nested within the dominant masculine framework like this: ‘[M]uted groups must mediate their beliefs through the allowable forms of dominant structures’ (1981: 200). Ardener (and Showalter) attest, however, to a ‘wild zone’ where female-centric culture can exist outside of the dominant culture, exceeding or bleeding beyond it. Correspondence is one such ‘allowable’ dominant structure, elastic enough to stretch to the ‘wild’: while its conventions are understood and practised by both men and women, it nevertheless allows women writers to exceed androcentric boundaries, shaping their writing in ways that suit their own specific purposes.

⁵¹ Sheridan (2011: 174) writes that Harwood was ambitious about establishing her reputation as ‘second only to AD Hope’.

women artists not ‘justifying themselves in the language of art’ (Showalter 1993: 117). In writing, this manifested traditionally in women’s description of their work as ‘scribbling’⁵²— implying a haphazard, half-conscious practice that does not take itself seriously. One might, at first instance, construe this description as an example of oppressive self-abnegating female humility; Elaine Showalter, however, calls the term ‘scribbling’ a ‘subterfuge’ (1993: 116), a ruse wherein women might claim the ‘artlessness’ of their work, so as to prevent its being considered threatening to either the social institution of womanhood or the cultural institution of androcentrism. The ludicrousness of this ruse is made apparent in the following quote from the 1856 novel *Ernest Linwood or The Inner Life of the Author* by Caroline Lee Hentz:

Book! Am I writing a book? No, indeed! This is only a record of my heart’s life, written at random and carelessly thrown aside, sheet after sheet, sibylline leaves from the great book of fate (Caroline Lee Hentz quoted in Showalter 1993: 115–6)⁵³

Gwen Harwood, habitually signing off her literary correspondence as ‘Tas housewife’ engaged in a similar, if more knowing, version of the same ruse. She deploys the ‘housewife’ moniker at once glibly and ironically — to acknowledge and lambast the literary establishment’s prejudices, as well perhaps as to defuse any threat her literary offerings might pose. How could a ‘scribbling housewife’ pose any danger to the masculinist Australian literary establishment? ‘Tas housewife’ was Harwood simultaneously sharpening and retracting her claws.

I suggest that correspondence has functioned, similarly, as a non-threatening or ‘clawless’ writing practice in western culture; it has been tolerated by the androcentric tradition as a form of benign ‘scribbling’ — the written version of women’s ‘prattling’ perhaps. Yet it seems to me that there is something interesting and liberating in this ambition-denying concept of ‘scribbling’; in a writing practice that does not even conceive of itself as writing, let alone as art. When ego is suspended, or discounted, in this way, perhaps certain advantages might accrue to the writer and to the writing, not least of all, the freedom of unencumbered experimentation. Risks might be taken in correspondence that might not otherwise be committed to the page.

⁵² Showalter (1993: 115) suggests the term ‘scribbling’ finds its origins in Hawthorne’s ‘famous words regarding the “d——d mob of scribbling women” ’.

⁵³ Interestingly, Caroline Lee Hentz was both a friend and adversary of Harriet Beecher Stowe: Hentz’s work was anti-abolitionist: Beecher’s, pro-

Correspondence as democratic: the common writer and reader

Beyond the benefits of being loose and relatively unregimented — Virginia Woolf's 'pliable' form — it could be argued that correspondence is also a more *democratic* writing form. This is because it stands apart from hierarchies of genre and the literary canon, but also because, unlike other forms of writing, in correspondence there seems to be a tendency for a democratic *levelling* of experience: one kind of experience might be played out alongside another. Correspondence tends to allow this kind of interplay between the profound and prosaic, philosophy and daily life, high culture and low culture. In Harwood's correspondence, there is no division between art and life, poetry and bills. 'Art is the only mirror!' she writes. 'Do you ever read Byron, that neglected poet? I often turn from 'the children and the tradesmen's bills' to 'Childe Harold's Pilgrimage'...' (To ET 10.9.57; Kratzmann 2001: 56). She frequently deploys poetry quotes to dramatise her domestic situation: 'Bill has gone to the USA and I have to be "the stately flower of female fortitude" (Tennyson). Most of my time goes in keeping the household affairs in order' (To ADH 4.9.61; Kratzmann 2001: 137). Ultimately, however, even when daily life is infused with poetry quotations, domestic pragmatism wins out over literary pedantry:

... There are so many things of which I want to write to you that if I continued to the end I should be an old lady amid dusty rooms, my children all gone. So let me exchange the pen for the broom, and a life 'deedful, yet silent' (Tennyson, I think, but I am certainly not going to look through 600 pages of fine print to make sure) (To TR 4.9.53; Kratzmann 2001: 46).

Harwood's letters also frequently demonstrate the equal place that day-to-day concerns and artistic concerns occupy in her life: a simultaneity of attentiveness that is precluded in androcentrism where priority must always lie with art. She mockingly bemoans her inability to prioritise art over life as did Romantic greats like Austrian poet Rainer Maria Rilke, who 'would have scorned utterly my attempts to combine domesticity with poetry' (To TR 29.2.60; Kratzmann 2001: 92). Yet immediately after making this statement, she deflates the idea that single-minded devotion naturally results in 'great works': 'I often wonder what I'd have had to show if I'd devoted myself to the Muse; I suspect, a couple of sensitivissima novels & a few more poems' (To AJ 2.2.61; Kratzmann 2001: 116). In

fact, Harwood’s writing benefits from a democratic broadness of interests and curiosity,⁵⁴ and her correspondence demonstrates not only an ability to ‘combine domesticity and poetry’, but also to sustain an additional artistic passion for music. In this way, her commitment to poetry was decidedly *anti-androcentric*: far from being singlemindedly devoted to poetry, poetry was only one of several equally valued commitments. This multiplicity of interests did not prevent Harwood from becoming one of Australia’s most-accomplished and best-known poets.

In correspondence we witness what Jane Marcus (1984: 86) calls the ‘common writer’ writing for the ‘common reader’. Echoing Woolf, who ‘privileged the female versions of [writing, reading and speaking] as more democratic than the male’ (Marcus 1984: 86), Marcus uses these terms to describe a female-centric writing practice that seeks to communicate rather than alienate, to connect rather than separate, avoiding in the process literary elitism⁵⁵ and the androcentric ‘Olympian tone’ that ‘delights to divide the world into “them” and “we” ’ (Heilbrun 1982: 809). Quoting Sylvia Townsend Warner in her 1959 ‘daughter’ lecture that took *A Room Of One’s Own* simultaneously as its starting point, its model, and its point of departure, Marcus writes: ‘Because [traditionally and historically] they have had no training, women writers share with Shakespeare a “kind of workaday democracy, an ease and appreciativeness in low company”, and an ear for common speech’ (Marcus 1984: 93). All of these attributes are, and always have been, present in correspondence, though not always elsewhere in literature; in fact, it is precisely these attributes that make letters vivid, dynamic and intimate — even when we are reading of lives played out centuries ago. Certainly, there is a vigour and immediacy — a spontaneity — in writers’ correspondence that is not necessarily to be found in their more considered, revised and re-drafted, consciously *literary* works.

⁵⁴ Poetry was not Harwood’s only creative interest. She was an accomplished pianist and had played for acclaimed pianist Arthur Rubinstein in her youth. Many of her poems take music as their subject matter. Indeed, she gave the experience of playing for Rubinstein to her ‘suburban housewife’ alterego Miriam Stone, in whose name she pseudonymously published poems about mid-twentieth-century motherhood and suburban domesticity (Kratzmann 2001: 153).

⁵⁵ ‘The writing practice of some new theory is often heavily authoritarian, deliberately difficult and composed in a pseudo-scientific language which frightens off or intimidates the common reader’ (Marcus 1984: 91).

Process-orientation: patchwork, pluralism, and Penelope

The quality of spontaneity that is often to be found in correspondence may also be due to the innate ‘process-orientation’ (Karen Davies quoted in Aronson 1999: 288) of correspondence-writing; its open-endedness and refusal to enclose itself into a ‘finished’ form. Here, too, we see a tacit repudiation of androcentric norms about writing. Quoting Linda Brodkey, Anne Aronson, in her 1999 case-study of women student-writers’ compositional practices in the context of space and time limitations, writes: ‘He is elected to write, she elects to write ... *he* is product, *she* is process’ (285, my emphases) — an essentialist but nevertheless interesting expression of a fundamental difference in men’s and women’s compositional approaches. Whether we perceive the androcentric approach as what might be called ‘product-orientated’ (artistic work that is focused upon a public outcome) or ‘end-orientated’ (the sense of artistic completion which comes with the conclusion of a project), in correspondence both orientations are denied. There is no anticipated public outcome; nor is there usually a definitive conclusion. Process is the key, and continuation is the goal. When correspondence ends, it is often less a matter of decision than of indecision. Long-term correspondence between two parties is more likely to ‘peter out’ than decisively conclude.

The non-linearity of correspondence — its inherent digressiveness and refusal to adhere to an organised, predetermined, *purposeful* shape — is yet another marker of its female-centric structure. Elaine Showalter (1993: 122) maintains that women’s texts, by nature, are ‘eccentric’ because, in part, of their innate non-linearity; in female-centric work, she writes, traditional ‘climactic’ literary structure is replaced by a ‘concentric’ structure:

Women writers often chose to construct narratives ... that were *weblike, circular and expanding, emphasising process and repetition, oscillation and resolution*. These are the structural qualities that make the quilt metaphor such a useful trope for understanding American women’s narrative forms (my emphases).

Although Showalter is discussing narrative fiction, the qualities she identifies (and which I have emphasised) are striking in their applicability to correspondence. So too the quilt metaphor she cites can be applied to correspondence, where experiences and ideas can be ‘tacked on’ to other experiences, the ‘whole’ being an impression made up of diverse parts, linked ultimately by the writer’s voice. In correspondence, where the ‘process’ of writing takes precedence over the seamless finished ‘product’, sudden sharp transitions and changes of topic are acceptable in ways they are not in traditional androcentric

fiction. One can see this at work in the following extract from Harwood to her long-time correspondent Tony Riddell, in which she jumps abruptly from complaint of the Australian literary scene to discussion of her hair:

...what I want to say is I'm glad you are staying in England. The situation here is hopeless for you. The Elizabethan trust is plugging a wretched piece of muck-truck called *The Shifting Heart*, and promises worse. And Christopher Logue's sickening rubbish in *Meanjin* has shaken my faith in Christesen's judgement and fairness—probably Logue has already published the stuff in England and been paid for it! Rats, off the sinking ship! How I wish I had kept my musical skill and could be free of the 'literary world' or what passes for one in Australia.

My hair is quite long again. I do it up in a horsetail, and look like someone who should creep under the counter of an espresso bar. Do send a picture of your beard soon (To TR 17.11.58; Kratzmann 2001: 65).

Harwood's 'topic change' here is at once a comic ploy and a deployment of the inherent formality-breaking conventions of correspondence itself. She is both sincerely expressing herself and consciously entertaining her correspondent, but she feels no need to flag her intentions, or smoothly segue between subjects.

We can also ascribe the 'quilt' metaphor to the way Harwood constructs her 'self' in her correspondence: the form allows her freedom to play with her identity, to construct multiple selves. While her letters alternate stylistically between exposition, poetry, anecdote, and satire, the form also allows her to 'jump' between personae: sometimes she signs off with the ironic 'Tas. housewife' moniker, sometimes with 'Gwen', and sometimes, more playfully, with 'Gwendolina'. Sometimes she is the slighted poet ('I am still smarting under the freckled shade' [To TR 5.11.59; Kratzmann 2001: 84]⁵⁶); sometimes the weary mother ['I have been grappling with illness, winter, middle-age, despair, etc. Sometimes it is 9 pm before I get any time to myself and then I am too tired to do anything but flop in front of the fire' [To TR 23.6.61; Kratzmann 2001: 122]]; sometimes the eccentric genius ('Sometimes I feel so mischievous I could burst, like a pressure cooker with the safety-valve soldered down' [To TR 26.4.57; Kratzmann 2001: xix]) the loyal friend ('Your friendship has been more to me than a simple enrichment; it has enabled me to interpret the world in a new way, quite inconceivable to me before I met you' [To TR 29.2.56; Kratzmann 2001: 52]); the caustic rival ('Vahnce and Nettie,

⁵⁶ 'The freckled shade' is a reference to Clem Christesen's use of this phrase (originally in a poem submitted to *Meanjin* by Gwen Harwood) in a poem of his own. Christesen was the long-standing editor of *Meanjin* and a particular focal point for Harwood's dissatisfactions with the Australian literary establishment.

those great old ‘uman lapping-flapping-moon-noon ark-darks. Ever since I heard Vahnce saying that Angus Wilson had no creative talent I’ve been planning a poison sandwich’ [To VS 4.2.59; Kratzmann 2001: 69]); the ironic wit (‘If someone got my meals and clean clothes I could write an epic. O the lost masterpieces!’ [To ET 3.4.61; Kratzmann 2001: 120]). The form allows her to play out, or perform⁵⁷, the many ‘selves’ or different identities that, in composite, perhaps most truly represent her essential self. With characteristic playfulness, she articulates in her letters her desire not to be limited to one role or identity:

I wish I had several lives, one for songs, one for poetry, one for being an abandoned alcoholic, one for being a cored and peeled hausfrau, one for beachcombing, one for being an Italian, one for being a native speaker of German, one for being Abbess of the Dames Bernadines, one for poisoning (successfully and without remorse) my enemies, one for playing Mozart, one to spend in museums... (To TR 17.11.58; Kratzmann 2001: 66).

The ‘self’ Harwood reveals in her correspondence is always in the process of *becoming*, or switching roles, or toying with new identities and possibilities. She is, in essence, a ‘patchwork’ self, comprising plural interests and alternating moods. This is also reflected in her famous use of pseudonyms to represent her different poetry ‘selves’⁵⁸:

[Walter] Lehmann allowed Harwood to articulate strongly passionate feelings and sometimes misogynist ideas, while [Francis] Geyer was more sharply defined as a migrant writer and failed musician, whose poetry frequently expressed alienation and loneliness. Miriam Stone was invented as a stereotypical ‘lady poet’ who nevertheless allowed Harwood to contribute forcefully to the poetry of female complaint (Sheridan 2011: 171).

A central tenet in feminist discourse has long been that, while male identity tends to be

⁵⁷ Stephanie Trigg describes Harwood’s playing with identities and pseudonyms as a ‘performative mode’ (1994: 7).

⁵⁸ Note that Harwood’s use of pseudonyms was as political as it was aesthetic. The male pseudonyms Francis Geyer and Walter Lehmann used between 1960 and 1964 were at once a way to get her work in print, and to show up the pretensions and prejudices of the literary establishment. Stephanie Trigg writes that ‘the [Australian] literary establishment was far more interested in lionising exotic male European intellectuals’ (13) than championing the work of Australian women poets, regardless of their talent. Harwood herself expressed considerable scorn for Clem Christesen, editor of *Meanjin*, who treated Harwood, she thought, dismissively, but accorded great respect to the fictional Francis Geyer and Walter Lehmann, inviting them to dine with him when in Sydney or Melbourne, and asking Geyer to read at the Adelaide Festival — invitations that were certainly not forthcoming to Gwen Harwood, Tas. housewife (Sheridan 2011: 171). Harwood’s response to the success of her ‘male poets’ is ambivalent: ‘I am glad I stayed quietly resentful for long enough to get Francis Geyer into *Meanjin*; (I rankle at his easy success, of course — what’s he got that I haven’t except his name?)’ (To AJ 2.2.61; Kratzmann: 116).

‘fixed’ and to include a ‘finite understanding of the self’ female identity is ‘relational’, ‘elastic’ (Kitch 1987: 15). ‘Female identity is a process,’ writes gynocritic Judith Gardiner, ‘and primary identity for women is more flexible and relational than for men’ (Gardiner quoted in Kitch 1987: 15). This same point has been reinforced in other ways by other feminist writers: Adrienne Rich describes the same notion in poetic terms: ‘no mere will to mastery,/only care for the many-lived unending/forms in which she finds herself’ (quoted in Kolodny 1980: 14)⁵⁹; Ursula Le Guin (1992: 231) describes women’s plural identities as a form of ‘many-namedness’, literally in the context of traditional marital name-changes, but also in the context of the woman writer’s identity itself: ‘the being of a woman writer [is] not one simple thing — the author — but a multiple, complex process of being, with various responsibilities, one of which is to her writing’. In her own case, Harwood described the use of different voices in her poetry as ‘operatic’ (Harwood quoted in Trigg 1994: 7) — the description can, I think, be extended to the personae she created and ‘performed’, with highly entertaining dramatic emphasis, in her correspondence as well.

Feminist critic Jane Marcus (1984: 84) draws upon the classical Penelope myth as a model for a female aesthetic that privileges process over product. In order to put off the many suitors asking for her hand, Penelope, wife of Odysseus, weaves by day a tapestry, only to undo her progress every night, thereby preventing the shroud she is making from being completed and herself from having to take a suitor in her husband’s absence. For Penelope, process saves and product dooms. I suggest that this aesthetic too is at work in correspondence, even at a very material level. Certainly, letters survive for posterity; they are kept by correspondents; they are sometimes collected by editors and bound into books and so become ‘products’, but they are not generally intended as such. They are equally likely to be burnt or hidden or read only by their intended recipient. They are more permanent than conversations in that they happen to be written down, but nevertheless they operate on the constant theme of ‘to be continued’. In correspondence, the object, like Penelope’s, is to keep the conversation, the ‘tapestry’, going and indefinitely

⁵⁹ ‘Such a composition has nothing to do with eternity/The striving for greatness, brilliance –/ only with the musing of a mind/ one with her body, experienced fingers quietly pushing/ dark against bright, silk against roughness,/ pulling the tenets of a life together/ with no mere will to mastery./ only care for the many-lived, unending/ forms in which she finds herself’ (Adrienne Rich, extract from ‘Transcendental Etude’, 1977).

postpone ‘the end’. Writes Marcus: ‘Transformation, rather than permanence, is at the heart of this aesthetic, as it is at the heart of most women’s lives’ (1984: 84). Certainly Harwood did not envisage her letters being collected as literary artefacts in and of themselves, nor did she imagine them as archival material for any literary ‘product’:

Did I tell you that someone from La Trobe wanted to write my biography? I replied that as I had never been anywhere or done anything much except stick around and cook it would hardly be a thriller (Letter to Fr William Paton, 30.4.91; Kratzmann 2001: xv)

CORRESPONDENCE AND THE VALUES OF MOTHERHOOD

Interruptibility: Babies before books

At the heart of the division between mothering and creative practice has been the notion that because mother-artists are encumbered by their care responsibilities, they cannot devote themselves to their work with the same intensity and integrity as the unencumbered male artist. The ‘historical fact of the interrupted woman’ (Marcus 1984: 90) has surfaced and re-surfaced as an issue obstructing women from achieving artistically. Woolf (1977: 74) alluded to interruption as a given: ‘[W]omen’s books should be ... framed so that they do not need long hours of steady and uninterrupted work. For interruptions there will always be’. Josephine Donovan (1984: 103) suggests that women’s ‘fundamental interruptibility’ emerges from their availability to others:

Just as women’s colonized lives are fundamentally invadable, so is women’s work perceived as interruptible. Others’ projects (her husband’s, her children’s) in the household have a priority. This phenomenon contributes to the structure of women’s artistic labour just as it does to their household labour, and it also contributes to a *consciousness that is aware of contingency, that perceives itself bound to chance, not in total control*. Such an awareness has obvious ethical and aesthetic considerations (my emphases).

Gwen Harwood described this experience of domestic interruption again and again in her letters, in reference both to her writing and to her music practice:

Lotte, my singer, has a lovely mezzo soprano voice and is a fine musician but we never get more than 10 minutes before some child needs attention or Bill comes scowling on the scene to say that x or y must be done at once with our help (To TR 19.3.55; Kratzmann 2001: 50).

My mind, as they say on the trams, has gone ‘a complete blank’. I took out my poetry notebook but the unworked stuff in it might as well have been in Finnish; something about jam-making & sewing and cheerful family parlour games has driven the muse away. I don’t have time to ‘touch’ the piano... (To TR 25.1.60; Kratzmann 2001: 88).

Sometimes it is 9 pm before I get any time to myself, and then I am too tired to do anything but flop in front of the fire. I haven’t written a word in months, feel as empty as the earth looks... (To TR 23.6.61; Kratzmann 2001: 122).

This experience of creativity being interrupted by care or domestic responsibilities is not confined to women writers of the nineteenth or mid-twentieth centuries. As I write this thesis in 2016, I interrupt my work constantly to respond to the world of my child: I stop to get snacks; to remedy problems; attend to outbursts of screaming; acquire and prepare drawing materials; find lost books; answer spelling enquiries; listen to an imaginative narrative just written; lace on rollerblades. My writing-space is fundamentally accessible to all: children loll on the bed, remove pens and papers and post-it notes, use my desk as a space for the application of nail-polish. This deprioritisation of the self-at-work, the preparedness to turn away from the work to attend to others, or to allow them ‘in’, is indeed a constant in mother-writers’ writing lives. In her 1999 study of the gendering of time and space, Anne Aronson describes women’s writing spaces as ‘permeable’ spaces, spaces that are ‘saturated with the needs of others’ (290–1): ‘[M]ale space was private, a retreat from the family; female space was open to human traffic — in fact, it was designed for such traffic’ (286). Aronson goes on to say that because a mother-writer tends to give primacy to the needs (in particular) of her children, fatigue and guilt will necessarily attend her writing practice; frustration, too, because of the resulting ‘fragmentariness’ of her work. Yet I would suggest that some, at least, of this frustration comes from women having internalised the notion — the myth — that ‘serious work’ can only be done in large chunks of uninterrupted continuous time. Harwood herself believed this myth:

I think of the days to come when all the children will be at school & I’ll settle down to the hard work that needs unbroken stretches of time... (To TR 3.12.54; Kratzmann 2001: 50)

Yet when women write letters — ‘non-serious writing’ — it appears that these interruptions are manageable, or do not invoke the same intensity of guilt and conflict. In correspondence, writers need not even hide interruptions; readers are allowed to see life ‘get in the way’; they are permitted to see the break-offs, the digressions and returns. ‘I must go now and will continue this letter later’ is acceptable protocol in correspondence. Harwood may well have believed that ‘unbroken stretches of time’ were necessary to her work, but the enormous amount of correspondence she wrote without that luxury contradicts her. Earlier, I suggested that being interrupted might not be so ‘terrible’ a

thing, that interruptions do not necessarily imperil creative work — or not ultimately. In correspondence, we can identify a writing tradition in which being interrupted by the demands of children and domestic life has always been tolerated; in which the broken, discontinuous thought is acceptable. The composition of a letter might proceed in fits and starts but be no lesser because of its ‘quilt-like’ composition; indeed, this compositional approach may well be part of what gives correspondence its freshness, its vigour, its verisimilitude.

Traditionally, women’s correspondence has fitted into the domestic routine; it has adapted itself to the needs of the domestic economy, existing within the context of the practical, the necessary:

Agnes... has given me a whole box full [of writing-paper], and while abundance suggests a lavish use, housewifely prudence asserts itself as usual, and I propose to write on the back too’ (Gwen Harwood to TR 13.11.54; Kratzmann: 46).

Harriet Beecher Stowe, at 27 already the mother of several children, advocates ‘dashing off’ a bit of novel-writing in the same practical, multi-tasking way a mother-writer might dash off a letter: while attending to other duties, and with interruptions part of the expected terrain. Based on this approach, in 1838 Beecher Stowe describes a very different notion of ‘genius’ to that disseminated by androcentrism:

I do not know what genius is given for, if it is not to help a woman out of a scrape... Just take your seat at the kitchen table with your writing weapons, and while you superintend Mina, fill up the odd snatches of your time with the labors of your pen (Beecher Stowe quoted in Olsen 2001: 104).

With similar pragmatism, Ursula Le Guin writes in 1988:

The one thing a writer has to have is not balls. Nor is it a child-free space. Nor is it even, speaking strictly on the evidence, a room of her own ... The one thing a writer has to have is a pencil and some paper. That’s enough, so long as she knows that she and she alone is in charge of the pencil, and responsible, she and she alone, for what it writes on the paper (1992: 236).

These two declarations, Beecher-Stowe’s and Le Guin’s, speak to each other across a century and a half — 150 years which have seen two ‘waves’ of feminist revolution. What they tell us is that the circumstances in which mother-writers write have *not* changed unrecognisably in that time. Mothers still need to tend to children; writing still needs to be ‘got done’.

If interruptibility comes about because women are 'other-oriented' (Huston 2001: 214) we need to change our thinking about interruptibility, not about 'other-orientation', because without 'other-orientation' civilisation as we know it would not exist. It is for this reason that 'locking doors' in 'rooms of one's own' can never be a definitive solution for mother-writers. As the poet Alta wrote in her prose poem *Momma* in 1974, how can a mother-writer resolve to lock the door on the child whose existence might well inform a poet's very work: 'how right is it to shut her out of the room so I can/write about her?/how human, how loving, how can/ I even try to/ :name her' (Alta quoted in Rich 1986: 279). It seems to me that, instead, it is the notion of interruption being *injurious to creative work* that needs to be debunked. If considered differently, interruption might even be seen to bestow certain advantages. Perhaps the interrupted sentence will be replaced by a better sentence. Perhaps five minutes' reprieve will take the creative process somewhere unexpected; perhaps, when the writer re-lands in her work, she will re-land at an interesting new position. To return to Margaret Drabble's manuscript-eating child in *The Millstone*, the eating of the manuscript turns out to be not so 'terrible' because *the existence of the child herself mitigates the tragedy*: 'It really was a terrible thing...and yet in comparison with Octavia being so sweet and alive it did not seem so very terrible' (Drabble quoted in Le Guin 1992: 230). Here perhaps is another commonality between Harwood and Drabble and Elizabeth Gaskell and all mother-writers, past and present: the work is important, fiercely so, but mother-writers do not, and will not, countenance the notion that the child is *less* important. The child remains paramount, the ordering principle against which the importance of all other events and achievements are cast. Writes Harwood, describing an editor's failure to return her unaccepted poems: 'I feel like someone whose children, believed to be safe, are reported playing on a cliff edge' (To VS 13.11.59; Kratzmann 2001: 86).

Motherhood and care inflect Gwen Harwood's whole system of thinking about the world and her actions in it. Writing to her friend Vincent Buckley in 1961, she states '[B]etter that poems should be unwritten if their cost is the least unkindness' (To VB 30.8.61; Kratzmann 2001:136). She reiterates this conviction in other letters, making clear that her children, despite their interruptions and distractions and her own constant weariness on their account, easily eclipse her writing in importance. To long-time friend Tony Riddell, she writes: 'Children are better than the best poems, but poems are good too' (9.5.62; Kratzmann 2001: 160). And to Vincent Buckley, rather more fiercely:

I’d throw away all my poems, present and future, to save any of my children a moment of worldly unpleasantness that the world won’t spare them anyway. It’s quite irrational but then motherhood is not based on reason (To VB 30.10.62; Kratzmann 2001: 169)

There is no place in Harwood’s value system for Gauguin’s abandonment of familial responsibilities; for Stravinsky’s demand of silence at luncheon; for the ‘watchful, tireless affection’ of Joseph Conrad’s wife (Conrad quoted in Le Guin 1992: 223). In fact, Harwood’s declarations require an entirely new, completely re-imagined set of values in order to make any sense. And they are *worth* trying to make sense of because Harwood was no literary flyweight: she managed to write and publish many very good poems, as well as a vast body of highly entertaining, comically masterful, personally poignant correspondence that bears reading to this day. According to an androcentric model, Harwood’s status as artist is diminished by her admission that her children are more important than her poems — it is indication of a lesser artist, an ‘amateur’ who is not prepared to make the necessary single-minded commitment — and yet Harwood proves the myth wrong by being, simply, a very good, very successful poet, and a very good, very successful mother.

There is something deeply reassuring, compassionate and, I think, truthful in what Harwood says about children being ‘better than the best poems’: it is like good old-fashioned plain-speaking from a trusted aunt. And yet Harwood’s words are also radical. They are radical because they up-end long-standing androcentric ‘truths’ about the individual heroism art-making requires of its practitioners. Not only do her words suggest that it *is* possible for art to be made without other people being sacrificed in the process; but, furthermore, that art that requires such sacrifices of us may *not be worth making*.

Care feminism: a ready-made moral framework

‘Parents wonder how much they can give, whereas artists wonder how much they can take’, wrote Nancy Huston in 1995 (2001: 212), uttering what appeared to be a weary truth about the conflict between parenting and art. But is it possible to conceive of a writing or artistic practice that not only does not deprioritise ‘giving’ but positively *prioritises* it? Harwood’s declarations above — that the wellbeing of her children trumps creative accomplishment — can be understood at a theoretical level by returning to the work of 1980s care feminism.

Care feminism (also known as ‘difference feminism’, though this term is perhaps more overtly problematic⁶⁰) validates and explains Harwood’s statements in a way no other theoretical framework does. Indeed, looked at through the lens of care feminism, as most famously articulated by psychologist Carol Gilligan in her 1982 book *A Different Voice*, Harwood’s position is validated as one of strength. In the androcentric tradition, her valuing of children over art is an admission of artistic ‘second-rateness’. In care feminism, the ‘naturalness’ of that conclusion is contested: the masculinist hierarchy that positions rights and individual self-interest as supreme is replaced, or at the very least complemented, by an intrinsically female-centric notion of responsibility and care. Women’s thinking and decision-making is shown to be guided by ‘care for other people’ rather than by ‘abstract rules and principles’ (Hirschmann 2010: 7). Although care feminism has since been contested, and in some ways invalidated (see fn60), by succeeding feminist theoretical models, I believe that it remains valuable as a readymade, highly persuasive moral framework that can still be used to reconceptualise art practice and overhaul long-stale, persistently androcentric ideas about creative commitment.

According to Gilligan’s ‘care’ model a woman’s failure to act selfishly — for instance, her failure to ‘lock the door’ on her child in order to continue her writing unimpeded — is a positive act that reinforces her connectedness with others through ongoing and reciprocal care relationships:

Sensitivity to the needs of others and the assumption of responsibility for taking care lead women to attend to voices other than their own and to include in their judgment other points of view. Women’s moral weakness, manifest in an apparent diffusion and confusion of judgment, is thus inseparable from women’s strength, an overriding concern with relationships and responsibilities (Gilligan 1982: 16-17).

Care feminism differentiates this type of care from the oppressive traditional tropes about motherhood that we saw in chapters one and two: the notion, for instance, that for a woman to be a ‘good’ mother, she must sacrifice herself entirely to her children. Instead, as feminist philosopher Nel Noddings writes in her work on relational ethics (an offshoot

⁶⁰ This is perhaps because it emphasises the acceptance of sexual difference in social roles as natural, and thus reinforces essentialist ideas. For instance, the criticism levelled at difference feminism and care feminism is that it merely replicates and perpetuates the status quo. Nancy Hirschmann (2010: 9) writes: ‘[T]he focus on care has done little to change the sexual division of labor. In fact, the celebration of care generally has reinforced women’s role as caregivers, just as many feminists originally feared’.

of care feminism), an ethics of care can be conceived of as quite different to the stereotypical ‘angel in the house’ (Showalter 2009: 12) model elevated by androcentrism:

[M]orality is not about affirming others’ needs through the process of denying our own interests. Rather, morality is about affirming one’s own interests through the process of affirming others’ needs (Noddings quoted in Tong 2009: 169).

Reconceptualised in this way, motherhood no longer entails self-denial so much as it creates potential for reciprocal fulfilment; activities relating to motherhood need not be seen as ‘interruptions’ to the ‘more important’ work of culture — the two ‘types’ of work can be mutually enriching.

In the context of creativity, Ursula Le Guin (1992: 231) explains how the internalisation of values of care and responsibility might account for women’s absence traditionally from the world of art, as defined and infused by androcentric values:

[A] man finds it (relatively) easy to assert his “right” to be free of relationships and dependents, à la Gauguin, while women are not granted and do not grant one another any such right, preferring to live as part of an intense and complex network in which freedom is arrived at, if at all, mutually. Coming at the matter from this angle, one can see why there are no or very few “Great Artists” among women, when the “Great Artist” is defined as inherently superior to and not responsible towards others⁶¹.

In Le Guin’s subsequent discussion of how writers Louisa May Alcott (via the ‘persona’ of Jo March in *Little Women*) and Joseph Conrad differently conceptualised their writing in the context of family life, one can see with even greater clarity how care feminism might redefine the terms and demands of creativity:

Conrad’s “struggle” and Jo March/Lu Alcott’s “vortex” [see Chapter one p. 32] are descriptions of the same all-out artistic work; and in both cases the artist is looked after by the family. But I feel an important difference in their perceptions. Where Alcott receives a gift, Conrad asserts a right; where she is taken into the vortex, the creative whirlwind, becoming part of it, he wrestles, struggles, seeking mastery. She is a participant; he is a hero. And her family remain individuals, with cups of tea and timid enquiries, while his is depersonalized to “an affection” (1992: 223).

There is a radical difference in the two approaches to writing described here. Jo March is involved in the *immediacy* of the process where Conrad is committed to its *mastery*; Jo’s identity is caught up, almost obliterated, in the experience; Conrad’s rests on future outcomes and his ultimate emergence as ‘hero’. What for her is a ‘gift’ (the time to write?)

⁶¹ Note that Le Guin cites the importance of Carol Gilligan’s work in this essay (1992: 231 fn).

the talent for writing? the joy of writing?) is for him an entitlement. And, most importantly for my purposes, Jo’s creativity operates within the fold of her *particular* intimate family; his reduces his most intimate relationship, his wife, to a ‘helpmate’, an adjunct or enabler — a disembodied ‘affection’. When Jo March’s work is finally published, hers is not a personal, individualised success, but a ‘household joy’ (Le Guin 1992: 214) in which all share, emotionally and financially.⁶²

Correspondence has always enabled women to work in this way — to become caught up, immersed, in the moment of the work, yet remain equally available and connected to life around them. It has not traditionally required of women that they sacrifice their children to their creative practice, the single cause of so much unnecessary guilt for mother-writers over the last two centuries. Because correspondence has not made elevated claims for itself as a genre — because women have not had to pronounce themselves ‘writers’ to be ‘letter-writers’ — life has been allowed to unfold and play out around its writing. Thus it deserves our attention, even as it fades from view as a literary practice, because it shows us a true ‘women’s way of working’, an essentially female-centric way of writing that accords with, and does not ask women to break faith with, their own values. Jane Marcus (1984: 84) puts this succinctly — and beautifully, I think — : ‘*A real woman’s poetics is a poetics of commitment, not a poetics of abandonment*’ (original emphases).

The benefits of motherhood

Harwood writes, in part facetiously, in 1962: ‘I’m glad I have the children: they’ll stop people saying, when the book comes out, “O she’d never write all that mad stuff if she had a family to look after’ (To TW 9.5.62: Kratzmann 2001:160). Children ‘ground’ women, common wisdom tells us. Hackneyed though this notion might be, children *do* ‘ground’ Harwood: not by making her practical and sensible and dismissive of a life of the imagination, but by reminding her to live in the moment, to experience and observe the texture of day-to-day life, and put aside the unhelpful frustrations of the literary ‘scene’. It is less apparent in her poems, but we can clearly see this in her correspondence.

⁶² Le Guin (1992: 215) quotes from *Little Women*: ‘Working in Boston as a governess-seamstress, Jo sees that “money conferred power: money and power, therefore, she resolved to have; not to be used for herself alone,” our author’s author hastily adds, “but for those whom she loved more than self...”’.

Rather than stall a woman’s creative productivity, a byproduct of motherhood might even be a greater, more intense experience of it. German painter Käthe Kollwitz wrote the following in her diary in 1910, at the age of forty-three:

I am gradually approaching the period of my life when work comes first. When both the boys were away for Easter, I hardly did anything but work. Worked, slept, ate, and went for short walks. But above all I worked. And yet I wonder whether the “blessing” is not missing from such work. No longer diverted by other emotions, I work the way a cow grazes.... Perhaps in reality I accomplish a little more. The hands work and work and the head imagines it is producing God knows what, and yet formerly, in my so wretchedly limited working time, I was more productive, because I was more sensual; I lived as a human being must live, passionately interested in everything...Potency, potency is diminishing (Kollwitz quoted in Olsen 2001: 111-112).

Here again the tropes about artistic progress, about artists requiring unbroken ‘slabs’ of time in order to produce ‘great work’, are overturned. Limited time becomes efficient time, fruitful time. Harwood writes of a similar experience of creative fecundity, alertness, and sensitivity to others during her active mothering years:

I thought of how pain sharpens us so that we read its signs in others, and felt the real (though indescribable) ferment of images that I must shape into poetry. One of my worst fears is that I’ll run dry when my woman’s reproductive age has passed...(To TR 18.7.63; Kratzmann 2001: 179).

That art might enrich motherhood, and motherhood enrich art: this is an idea that has rarely been articulated in our culture: ‘[I]t would be difficult to locate a subject at once more unexplored and more rich in social and political implication’, writes feminist Alicia Ostriker (2001: 159). Le Guin, introducing Ostriker’s words in her own essay, alerts us to how absurdly infrequently this idea is expressed⁶³: ‘“The advantage of motherhood for a woman writer,” [Ostriker] says — have you ever heard anybody say that before? The *advantage* of motherhood for an artist?—

The advantage of motherhood for a woman artist is that it puts her in immediate and inescapable contact with the sources of life, death, beauty, growth, corruption... If the woman artist has been trained to believe that the activities of motherhood are trivial, tangential to the main issues of life, irrelevant to the great themes of literature, she should untrain herself. The training is misogynist, it protects and perpetuates systems of thought and feeling which prefer violence and death to love and birth, and it is a lie (Ostriker quoted in Le Guin 1992: 228–9).

⁶³ Here I reproduce the Ostriker quote from Le Guin (1992), with Le Guin’s interspersed comments.

And yet, for all this, in 2016, motherhood, I contend, remains understood as a ‘female’ rather than a ‘human’ experience. Woolf wrote of the devaluation of women’s experiences of the world in 1929:

This is an important book, the critic assumes, because it deals with war. This is an insignificant book because it deals with the feelings of women in a drawing room. A scene in a battle-field is more important than a scene in a shop — everywhere and much more subtly the difference of value persists (1977:70–1).

Rich reiterated this bias in 1986 (xv): ‘Some ideas are not really new but keep having to be affirmed from the ground up. One of these is the apparently simple idea that women are as intrinsically human as men...’. Certainly, the bearing and raising of children, rather than be accorded its rightful primary place in the pantheon of human experience, has been — and to an extent, still is — relegated to the shadowy realms of secret women’s business. Despite a feminist revolution intervening between herself and Woolf, in 1988 Le Guin could still write:

It seems to me a pity that more than fifty years have passed and the conventions, though utterly different, still exist to prevent men from being shocked, still admit only male experiences of women’s bodies, passions, and existence. It seems to me a pity that so many women, including myself, have accepted this denial of their own experience and narrowed their perception to fit it, writing as if their sexuality were limited to copulation, as if they knew nothing about pregnancy, birth, nursing, mothering, puberty, menstruation, menopause, except what men are willing to hear, nothing except what men are willing to hear about housework, childwork, lifework, war, peace, living, and dying as experienced in the female body and mind and imagination (1992: 228).

In correspondence, we see a little of the otherwise invisible experiences, thoughts and ideas of women that Le Guin alludes to. We see what women have been able — social conventions withstanding — to share with each other and with intimate friends; we see the material of women’s daily lives, prosaic or dramatic, that is otherwise uncelebrated. In correspondence we can identify and celebrate a strong counter-tradition to the androcentric in which mothering *is* conducive to writing, to art-making, to creativity — to *adventure*, even. It is important that this tradition be recognised because mother-writers are arguably still troubled by the residue of the ‘books versus babies’ myth. The androcentric ‘rules’ persist. Wrote Naomi Wolf in 2003, soon after becoming a mother:

As a writer, I was haunted by images of all the bruised kids of women writers: Mary McCarthy’s neglected son; Sylvia Plath’s abandoned toddlers; Colette’s wan-faced daughter with the au pairs; Zelda Fitzgerald’s tough, self-sufficient daughter; Ann Sexton’s despairing daughter... (2003: 68-9)

It seemed to Wolf that ‘[y]ou could not, in our culture, easily pair motherhood with many other alluring archetypes or descriptions’ (2003: 68) without harm in some way coming to offspring. The idea that a creatively committed woman, adventurous in her life and in her work, must necessarily be a bad, a neglectful, an inadequately committed mother is a fear that still rings true more than a century after its inception.

Like all women of her generation, Naomi Wolf is the inheritor of androcentric notions: notions in which female ‘genius’ manifests as madness; and motherhood — because of its concomitant responsibilities — is seen to tame, to dilute, to compromise the creative spirit. Yet there is another tradition, and the women writers in this tradition have long been there, ‘scribbling’ away while the washing dries and the baby sleeps. A female-centric view of art — and of the world — shows us that women can be mothers and writers without either their children suffering or their art suffering. If the androcentric ‘locked door’ mode of composition does not suit a mother-writer’s reality, we only have to look to correspondence to find that an ‘open door’ policy has been in operation all along.

Conclusion

In this thesis I maintain that women’s values are still not accorded centrality in the way western society perceives of creative practice and output. Women have different ways of making art and literature — different subjects and experiences that are important to us, different approaches that make sense to us, different sets of priorities we bring along with us — but this has not been adequately recognised or enshrined in cultural thinking. Subsequently, androcentric myths about art remain with us, however residually, in the twenty-first century. Motherhood, a life-changing, life-shaping experience in the lives of many female writers, has the potential to radically transform thinking about art practice. In its necessarily female-centric focus, motherhood gives us art made from within the midst of life rather than in isolation from it; art that can weather interruption without fatal damage; that observes responsibility rather than flees from it.

In correspondence I have identified a literary form and tradition that enabled, however quietly, the practice of a female-centric approach to writing. This practice neither invisibilised, or required the ‘writing-out’, of female experience, but allowed its expression and, accordingly, its demands. Gwen Harwood expressed her complaints about suburban motherhood in her poetry. In her correspondence, however, she expressed and contradicted, bemoaned and disproved these same complaints; in her correspondence, she wrote her fluid, changing, changeable, *human* experience into view. This same dedicated practice of correspondence also proved that, despite the responsibilities of motherhood, she could compose vast amounts of writing from ‘within the midst of life’. Her correspondence constitutes a body of eminently readable, eminently literary work, composed according to the tradition by which mother-writers have always worked — absent of locked doors, individually sacrosanct spaces, and ‘Do Not Disturb’ signs.

Correspondence is, I believe, the only truly female-centric writing tradition we have. Through its documentation of women’s/mothers’ daily lived experiences, it enables us to begin to properly piece together what Adrienne Rich (1986: 17) calls ‘the half-

buried mosaic’ of female culture into the ‘shape of a female face’. It is a form of writing never explicitly marked as ‘radical’, never threateningly ‘other’, but which nevertheless allowed women to ‘[be] there in their own right’ (Tompkins 1987: 177), and speak to other women accordingly, across generations and circumstances.

There is still work to do in throwing off deeply entrenched androcentric modes of thinking about art and literature. I recognise, furthermore, that ‘letter-writing’ is no longer much practised; is indeed an anachronistic writing form. Nevertheless, there is something in the approach of correspondence-writing — and the enduring nature of that approach across generations of mother-writers — that might be incorporated into women’s thinking about their creative practice, not only so that that practice becomes less productive of guilt, of frustration, of a sense of incompleteness or inadequate commitment, but so that the androcentric hero myth is finally, properly, debunked. Perhaps it may be possible to take the *approach* of correspondence — its provisionality, interruptibility, openendedness — and apply it in different literary contexts. It would be interesting to embark on a study of novel-writing ‘in the midst of life’ as per Beecher-Stowe. What sort of writing might be produced? A fragmented text? A visibly interrupted text? A digressive text? An epistolary novel, even? Or perhaps a text that bears no marks at all of the difference in its production? Correspondence provides a fruitful starting point for further examination of what a truly female-centric model of literary practice might look like, a model that would necessarily include the values, concerns and practices brought about by motherhood as it differently enacts on, and radically reconfigures the lives and creative practice of, female practitioners.

Bridging Statement:

The creative work that follows is a fabricated correspondence between a mid-century Australian poet and her sister. It does not intend to ‘mimic’ Harwood’s correspondence so much as to recreate the times and experiences of an imaginary poet-mother character, who goes on to enjoy, not popularity or critical praise as did Harwood, but literary obscurity. The main correspondence is framed by an additional correspondence from the late 1970s between the poet’s son and would-be publishers who seek to publish posthumously the poet-mother’s work. In this way, the creative work draws on the late twentieth gynocentric project of reconfiguring the literary canon and restoring to visibility forgotten female writers. The creative work, ‘The Pepper Experiment’, could perhaps best be understood as a self-contained extract from a larger intended epistolary novel. The epistolary form enables me to create an immediate and direct voice for the poet-mother character, as well as insight into the peculiar vulnerabilities of motherhood, that would perhaps be harder to achieve in a more conventional novelistic form.

Chapter Four: Creative component

EXTRACTS FROM ‘THE PEPPER EXPERIMENT’

*Correspondence between Julia Graham-Hammond and Owen Ferrugia
14.09.79—30.10.79*

14 September 1979

Dear Mr Ferrugia

I contact you in regards to a project Bacchae Publishing is most excited about. In May this year, we were forwarded a package from the estate of the late Matilda Bryant, your mother’s sister. The executors of Ms Bryant’s estate found in her possession a large amount of your mother’s unpublished poetry, as well as an extensive correspondence from her.

Your mother’s poetry has astounded us both in its volume and its quality. There are over 400 poems — penned over a period of some ten years (not all are dated). As you may be aware, in her lifetime, your mother published very little and, apart from a few obscure references in journals, the literary world has been almost completely unaware of her work. As it turns out, her lack of publication was in no way representative of her literary output.

We would very much like to see ‘The Poems of Veda Dray’ published and brought to the readership they deserve — they are daring and experimental and cast new light on mid-century modernism.

I attach for your interest a selection of the poems that were in Ms Bryant’s possession. Please contact me on the telephone number below to discuss our publication plans. We would love your input and involvement in this very worthy project.

Yours,

Julia Graham-Hammond
Bacchae Publishing

20 September 1979

Dear Ms Graham-Hammond

Your letter came as something of a shock to me. My mother died when I was eleven and although I remember her as writing, I had no idea she had produced what might be termed ‘a body of work’. She presented me with joke rhyming verse at Christmas and for my birthday, but that’s all I remember.

I’m sure she would be grateful and happy to have her poems published, if they are as good as you seem to think them. Naturally, I would like to read them before publication — not that I am any critic, however. What are your plans for her correspondence?

Thank you for considering me in your publication plans. I imagine I am the sole copyright holder, is that correct?

Yours truly,

Owen Ferrugia

25 September 1979

Dear Mr Ferrugia

Thank you for your response. I have included three more of your mother’s poems — these might particularly interest you as they were written about you as a child: ‘Still-Life’, ‘Breakfast Poem’, ‘Examples of Mirth’. If you have preserved any of the poems she wrote for you when you were a child, we would be very interested in looking at them.

The remainder of your mother’s work will arrive with you under separate cover in the next week or so. As I understand, you are indeed the sole copyright holder. In terms of related royalties: it is very hard to judge what sort of financial success such a book as ‘The Poems of Veda Dray’ will have. Poetry commands a fairly small share of the literary market. That said, there is a boom of interest in the works of Australian women poets and visual artists. This is reflected in a genuine excitement currently occurring in feminist scholarship and art curation, and the rise of burgeoning feminist presses such as our own. Certainly, we will use this broadening interest to our advantage in marketing. Will you meet with me in the next month or so to discuss these questions?

In terms of your mother’s letters, our hope is to follow up the publication of the collected poems with a critical essay on her work by literary scholar Lucinda Evans, which will form the Introduction to a companion volume ‘Selected Letters of Veda

Dray'. Again, I am excited to work with you in selecting those letters of hers that best bear publication.

You have not mentioned the fact that we are using your mother's maiden name, and not her married name, in publication. Should I assume your silence on this means that decision is acceptable to you?

Yours,

Julia Graham-Hammond

7 October 1979

Dear Ms Graham-Hammond

I am afraid all the poems and cards Mother wrote me were disposed of after her death. You might know that my father died not long after my mother and I was sent to live with relatives in the country. This was a very trying time for me. I hope that is enough to explain my failure to keep mementoes that might otherwise be of value.

I'm afraid I wasn't much taken by the poem 'Still-Life' that you sent me, but the other two were comical and I remember the old blue chair with the peeling paint my mother refers to in 'Breakfast Poem'.

Regarding her letters, it is very strange to imagine that anyone would be interested in reading of my mother's daily affairs, but I leave that decision to your expert hands. I am also a little nervous about some of the things my mother might have said. Although my father is dead, I would hate a bad picture of him to be drawn for posterity, as he was a good man and always, I think, good to my mother. In regards to my mother using her maiden name, I don't suppose anyone will judge her for doing that these days?

The remainder of the poems have arrived in a large batch and I am just waiting to find the time to read them. Unfortunately, my university studies were of a practical bent, and my literary knowledge is fairly limited. I will do my best to make sense of them, and my wife, who is a schoolteacher, has offered to help. We have one child and another on the way and run a vineyard in the Yarra Valley. I am regularly in Melbourne, however, and will certainly make the time to meet with you when I am next in town. Perhaps you could pass on to me my mother's letters, as I am keen to read these, particularly before any decisions are made regarding their publication.

Yours Sincerely,

Owen Ferrugia

30 October 1979

Dear Mr Ferrugia,

Let me first reiterate my thanks for meeting with me last Thursday to discuss the publication of your mother's work. Further to our conversation, we have now set a date for publication of 'The Poems of Veda Dray' of 8th of May next year. I attach the intended contents list for your perusal. Where untitled, poems are identified by their first lines. We are planning to include 316 of the 410 that are in existence.

As requested, I now forward your mother's correspondence in as close to its original chronology as possible. I hope you find her letters as vivid and interesting as we have. Again, I am open to hearing your thoughts on them and will certainly consider your sensibilities during the editorial process.

I do not feel there is anything to concern you re your parents' reputations in these letters. Although your mother's life was perhaps more 'Bohemian' than most, I believe these letters contain nothing more dramatic than the ordinary interests and preoccupations of a 1950s Australian mother, woman, and — perhaps less ordinarily — poet. It is precisely the 'mirror' your mother's letters provide into a woman artist's daily emotional life that makes them culturally important. I hope you will agree and will also see the merit in their publication.

Yours truly,

Julia Graham-Hammond

Extracted letters from the correspondence of Veda Dray (Ferrugia) and Matilda Bryant, 1954–1955

10 November 1954

Dear Tilde

Have just come inside from bright spring-smelling sunshine in the backyard, tomato plants covered in green baubles, beginnings of a 'kitchen garden' evident in fronds of dill and a monopoly of mint (such a hardy wanderer once it gets going!) — all of which sounds idyllic had I not, wheeling up to come in, nearly garrotted myself on the washing line. One hardly conceives how the accumulation of wet white flannels might turn the whole apparatus into a death trap.

We have here a minimum of space, but along with that, fortunately, a minimum of upkeep. And we are at the better end of things, for the rest of this suburb is overcrowded to the point of slum-dwelling: a whole family to a room in some cases. Indeed, I think I can safely say we live on the outskirts of a slum. I know it is temporary, just while R sorts out the sale of St Kilda, but it is a shock! There is talk of the council clearing the whole area. Fitzroy is not so much a den of iniquity as a hive of small commonplace sadnesses and misfortunes, overladen with drink, which seems the ubiquitous vice. At least now we are in spring, things will dry (clothes, mud &c). Owen is always dirty, but having quickly learned the futility of washing dirty articles only to have them soiled within minutes, I am no longer applying myself fastidiously to that particular treadmill. (Though I am mortified, if we are all out, on Smith or Brunswick Streets, by evidence of my failings as espied by others: foodstains especially.) A little freedom is good for children, I think, but they have too much of it here, where a park if it springs up by order of a civic authority is immediately transformed into a battleground with stones, sticks, slate or firecrackers. Anything will do. Wood. Bottles. Even shoes make good ammunition. This is an all-together different kind of boyhood than that I knew our brothers to have: it is chaos, anarchy. You would run shrieking from it, I know you would. Your children are always so well-turned-out, polite, with their straight blond hair, their clean shoes.

What will become of mine? Well, so far, he is too small to know anything except what goes in his mouth, which is an endless fascination, and I fear he will follow in his father's footsteps.

It is of constant surprise to me, Tilde, that I now find myself in this stolid little house, feeding pennies into a slot to run the gas. You have always said I was contrary by nature. If I had started out poor, no doubt I would now be married to a rich man — although, perhaps lacking the charms to net a rich man, I am overly optimistic here. Anyway, neither of us have triumphed over our origins, have we? If we were men, we might have thrown our fathers' careers into shadow.

Love Veda x

30 November 1954

Dear Tilde

Have just got in from the Parishes'. Spent the weekend at their Estate (there is no other word for it) where we get 'in touch' with Nature. R looks at paintings he doesn't have words for with Mr Parish, and foodstuffs (which he does) with Mrs. P. We went for the whole weekend, which means our days were organised for us, with set periods of entertainment alternating with free periods when we must suit ourselves, and wander, and fill in time as best we can. I, for my part, am at a loss to do much there but walk and smoke, fearing the 'pose' of settling at the window with my notebook and pen. For, as I am never asked of my own literary prowess (except by Mrs, occasionally, in whispered undertones, so as not to be heard) I cannot bring myself to foist the 'fact' of it (dare I call it 'fact'?) into the Parish consciousness. Much better to chat about food, or to prove myself a generally discerning but non-threatening reader of other people's work. I acquit myself intelligently enough in literary discussions. I have given opinions on the latest offerings in Southerly and been agreed with, though with reservations. Mr Parish has a new collection he hopes will come out late next year. We have discussed Ern Malley, that old chestnut, and I find him a harsh critic of MacAuley and Stuart. I am happy not to speak of my own

'work' really (I can barely even call it such, not even to you, for fear that it might shrivel in the face of being taken seriously).

So, dinner is invariably afloat in literary conversation. Mr Parish says C-C (of Meanjin fame) is undeniably a snob, and every rakish detail I extract from him I put under my bonnet to savour later. Still, I am red-faced with shame when I recall the secret 'package' I lay on Mr P's desk, creeping away afterwards and hoping for a word. Which was, as you know, unforthcoming. Why I sought his encouragement remains a mystery to me. Perhaps the package 'blew away' or 'disappeared up the chimney' – it was fairly slim, after all. I nurture a mild vanity that the raw untutored brilliance of my poems was threatening to him in some way. Still, I blush now. (I will come back, must attend to a roasting chicken that needs basting, carving, gravy-ing... and the child is at large with crayons...)

Back. Owen asleep like a pretty wind-tossed angel, so let me tell you more of the Parishes. Mrs I like very much: she is henpecked (might a woman be 'hen-pecked'? I turn it over in my head and think it perhaps unacceptable to say...) She is brown and dour, tall and square, with shoulders like a man's, and beautifully set hair. Can you see her in my rhyme? Pale brown twin set that forces her shoulders into a stoop as though the tension in the knit is too tight. You know the way tall women have of trying to make themselves smaller? I have put her in poems once or twice, as you can see above. I like her but I don't know what to make of her: she is a figure of both ridicule and respect. The 'wild' of Park Orchards is beneficial for Owen, who totters in from the outdoors, tumble-weeded and sunburnt, to eat large portions of bread, dripping, apples from their own trees &c. And that is before the commencement of luncheon! I am not quite so blasé, however, as to forget ponds, dams, disused mineshafts... In fact, I cannot even read contentedly, for I must look up and spot Owen continually, and then put things down (pages flutter, place is lost) to run over and check he is indeed behind that tree and hasn't crossed some boundary line, past which reside snakes, bunyips, men with shotguns, ...

It is Fitzroy that has made me alert to every sound and possibility; it has opened them up to me where before they were mere stories from unimaginable places. Just last week a little girl some houses down was attacked by her mother's lodger, a tall thin

apparently average man I had been in the habit of saying hello to. R is close to securing a lease on a place in Hawthorn, near the river, across from Richmond: a big old house split in two, of which we will take the front portion. There is a bay window and big shadowy trees in a deep garden. Peppercorns in the street. The tram runs nearby, straight into the city, the 42 line – (do you remember it? When we stayed with Uncle John in Mont Albert? Very same line!)

If you ask me how my ‘work’ proceeds in the midst of this, I can only tell you: short, unsatisfactory stints mainly. And yet, when I find myself with an uninterrupted few hours, I’m panicked, can’t get a thing down. I open my notebook, and a great wave of exhaustion overcomes me: is it that the thought of work tires me, or that my own work bores me so much it puts me to sleep? I suspect some subconscious avoidance is at work. When I have time, at a desk, in silence, the whole enterprise of Poetry (capital P) becomes preposterous. Like pretending to work at the Parishes’: a pose. And now I am writing, without even meaning to, in alliteration.

I only tell you this because I know you will encourage me and pepper me in praise that, deserved or not, will spur me on to more scribbling!

I have thought to hawk these vestigial bits of writing on main street corners. On a soap-box. I will be thought a religious preacher, no doubt, and will bring disgrace upon my family. But so long as no one recognises me, for the moment that is my solution. I will finance a run of chapbooks and keep them under my bed; if they do not sell, well, I can line a ceiling with them. (Yes, that is my fall-back plan: insulation!) But would *I* buy such a book, I ask myself honestly, if some Bolshie female flagrantly waved it in my face as I passed her in the street? And I think: well, I might be curious enough to have a look ... I don’t know. (I have gone so far as to wonder what colour to make my imaginary chapbook. Red, I have heard, is more attention-grabbing.)

I went out and bought two slabs of steak this afternoon, and came home and fried the whole thing up with potatoes and mushrooms, and I must say my husband was delighted, and O choked on a piece larger-than-it-should’ve-been — R leaned across the table in a flash, had O by the chops and his hand down his throat and up came the

offending article, hardly chewed as that boy does not chew but inhales food. But god, what a palpitation of the heart: you know the body keeps shaking for minutes after a scare like that. I felt weak eating the rest of dinner.

Excuse my prattling, all over the place, and I have hardly enquired about Frank's practice, or Marigold's nuptials. You must send back big, thumping letter full of detail and laughs,

Veda x

21 December 1954

Dear Tilde

Happy happy Christmas to you and to us! We are in Hawthorn! No more nightly drunkards waking us, no more glass shards in the soles of my shoe or vomit on the cobblestones! For the purposes of play, Owen now has a big front-garden behind a big safe fence with a big fat tree to climb, and I have private use of a light-filled porch where I have set up a desk and my papers. The room is next to the 'nursery' (this is a small antechamber connected to our bedroom, where Owen naps, and so I can hear any grumble, any precipitous fall out of the cot, complaint &c). We have a little xmas tree that shimmers amongst all our unpacked boxes, and are feeling delightfully frugally festive.

Thank you for your delicious account of M's wedding. I can see her in all that white and the long train and the gypsophila in her hair. Must've looked like a Pre-Raphaelite princess. I am so happy for her. Will they stop off in Melbourne on the way back? They are always, of course, welcome here, now that we have a serviceable home to offer. Did my platter arrive unbroken? I assume it did. Or perhaps you would not tell me if it didn't! Never mind. My platter is the last of their concerns, or yours.

I have sort-of news of my own. As well as this new much-improved tenancy, R has found a perfect lease for his next venture in the very middle of the city. The top of Collins Street, which they are beginning to call the 'Paris end' of Collins — there are galleries and some very fine couture tailors (nothing that I could afford of course, but I like to press my nose to the window), watchmakers, bookshops. R will open a small Italian restaurant in a side street: limited menu, authentic fare. It will be a step up from the St Kilda café — which turned out, upon finalisation of the sale, to make us a nice little profit, after all. I encourage R in these ventures, because I trust him, you know, and despite my occasional fears, it seems he reads the mood correctly. Has a business head on him &c. Certainly, we are in a better circumstance than a year ago. People like the Parishes, the Allens and the Moorheads will spread the word amongst the art world and literati. Thank goodness for their friendship — so serendipitous! All of us want vivid, vibrant artistic life to flourish in this city. (It does exist, in small pockets — one just needs to know how to find it.) R, meanwhile, is amassing something of a collection of works on paper — these are essentially promissory notes from artists he has fed in St Kilda, artists with tabs they could not pay. I have no reservations about this. Again, I say, I trust him. Isn't that a fabulous thing to say about one's husband? It makes me quite content to be a wife.

Happy happy, merry merry and all of that!

Veda x

7 February 1955

Dear Tilde

Frank won how much at the races? I am flabbergasted! I didn't even know he was a punter! Here's me, thinking you married to the most stolid, respectable general practitioner in the southern hemisphere, and all the time you're putting on your hats and off to the races, trading in all that fabulous respectable money for little fluttering bits of paper... So, you will now, no doubt, come down to Melbourne for the big 'un in November? You will stay with us, of course, and R and I will introduce you to

some struggling artists we know, and, being the reckless big-time gamblers you are, you will take a gamble on art patronage! The returns might astound you. (Oh yes, Tilde, I have you marked as a patron of the arts.) Frank, of course, will do exactly as you say. You will buy with discernment and passion (one must have both), Frank will nod generously and unfurl the notes from his wallet, the artists will fete you and adore you and offer to paint your portrait. And one day there will be a plaque bearing your name set into the brickwork of a very important public wall: ‘For services to art and culture’. You think I jest, but I am in earnest, Tilde. Fingers crossed for your filly! I might even have a flutter myself, come November.

Our ‘restaurant’ (not sure why I put that in inverted commas) is close to opening. Very simple. White table-cloths, red drapes, gold writing on the window. It is called ‘L’esperimento Pepper’ (The Pepper Experiment). Flushing toilets for both Signor and Signora. Framed works on walls. Candlelight. R is unbearably nervous about the opening. Owen and I are abandoned entirely. In fact, Owen cries when he sees his father because R is so frantic, so unpredictable, so completely and utterly agitated. I can hardly bear it myself. Can we come and stay?

Well, of course, we cannot. I am needed to play maitre’ d and must leave Owen in the hands of an elderly neighbour while I do so — a good-hearted, asthmatic woman, desperate for grandchildren of her own. Unfortunately, she makes me slightly nervous. She’s the sort who might leave a saucepan handle sticking out on the stove... an Auntie Flora, I fear: unerringly well-intentioned but somehow not quite on the ball. However, Owen is a lamb, and is good with anyone — only difficult with me, I’m afraid. And what can I do? Who do I put first in the end: R or O? The needs of my husband or the needs of my child? That, it seems to me, is the greatest conflict in a woman’s life, if truth be known.

Hmmmmmm. Advice sorely needed, gratefully received.

Meanwhile ... I have met an interesting and possibly advantageous character who might avail me of opportunities. Not sure. (Narrow your eyes suspiciously when I say such things.) Barrington Knox runs the bookshop across from us on Collins Street — well, it’s in a nearby lane actually, he can’t afford a Collins Street shopfront, as nor

can we. Sells a lot of poetry — modernist imports mainly — but has his own imprint: Knox House. Has published Emily Harrow and Anthony Stedmann. You wouldn’t know them, not sure why I’m naming them, but they are not altogether rubbish. Knox is a frequenter of the Savage Club, where he hobnobs presumably with doctors and lawyers and bankers and gets them investing in his projects — one of which is a bi-monthly poetry and art magazine called Strident. It’s not Meanjin, but I like what I’ve seen of it. He wants to read my work. Eeeek. I feel like a deer trapped in headlights. Paralysed. I will slip a wad of ‘em under his door and run like ‘the wind’.

Sorry! Had sudden nappy mishap – knew I’d left it too long. You know when you think your timing and judgement are accurate only to find yourself woefully wrong?? My laundry is the deep pit of hell... Where was I? My new friend, Knox.

He’s a barrel of a man — hardy consumer of whisky, beef, and cream. Wears fur. Large moustaches. Has a darling wife named Edith, the size of a sparrow, who is always rearranging books on shelves and smiling nervously at him. I like her. I like him, I think. He has gusto. They are very good with Owen. Let me put him on the floor while I talk without getting agitated about him touching things. They love books it seems, but they’re not so precious about them that a small child is a threat. So I have been going in there and talking poetry with them. Very different conversations to the ones I have with Parish. There’s lots of laughter, and usually a sherry bottle passed around, and occasionally the little bell on the door will tinkle and some poor interloper will come in actually wanting to browse and buy and will be utterly discomposed by the sight of us, lounging on the floor with our shoes off, using the book shelves to prop our ashtrays and our drinks on. (John Brack himself popped in last week! That sobered us up.) Anyway, in one particular animated conversation I got to telling them about my own poems. (I can’t seem to help myself, spilling the beans. Then I lose my nerve...) Anyway, as above: poems will get slipped under door. All I have to lose is a convenient peaceable book-shop relationship. I should read the newspapers more anyway...

Will let you know the outcome, if there is one. In the meantime, put on your specs and start doing some research, future wealthy art collector! Send my love — and equine respect — to Frank.

X Veda

PS Tell Marigold all is forgiven — she can play hostess next time we're up and show off her housewifery skills (I'd be none the wiser!)

25 March 1955

Dear Tilde

Well, the child talks! We have fourteen words now counted: opsicle (popsicle), toast, mamma, dadda, engine, ball, dog, milk (pronounced 'moolk'), banana, chip, car, book, rooster, and, unaccountably, cucumber!

Phew for that! He is and will be turning into a real person, it seems. I must say, I was starting to wonder... He will come to the word 'No' pretty soon, I imagine, and I will be thinking back wistfully to the days of gibberish. His father is gratified that nearly half his words are foodstuffs. For my part, I am achingly proud of the word 'cucumber' which he utters with great delicacy and refinement: 'Too-tumber!'

He has coped well enough with Mrs Mathers and the late night exchange while I maitre'd it at L'esperimento. I will do it only another week or so and then R will be properly on his feet and charming and seating guests and popping corks and folding napkins himself. We have had several late-night flurries of post-theatre-goers from the Princess Theatre — L'esp. looks set to be the late-night dining venue, operating when others have shut their doors. We have even had the cast in a couple of times, though generally-speaking they tend to come late and stay later, are very boozy (we have to lock the doors), which is all great fun but tiring for me who must be up at the crack of dawn dandling a baby and making infant-friendly stodge for breakfast.

Earlier in the evening — once the Swanston and other pubs have closed at 6 — we seem to get the Contemporary Art Society artists, whose conversation is exhilarating, though as gossipy as the Princess Theatre actors: politics, the National Gallery, Menzies, the abstractionists versus the realists versus the surrealists. All come under fire, as do each other, I'm afraid. (And men say women are the world's gossips!) They drink a lot and eat a lot and run tabs (that do not worry me for R will collect in kind what cannot be paid in cash — do I sound merciless? I only know we do not lose out in this arrangement). We cannot be, and do not want to be, what the Swanston Family Hotel is to the art world — we have no Tiepolos on our walls, no Manets, no Rembrandts, but we have Charles Blackman, Donald Friend and Sidney Nolan on paper, and a small painting by Albert Tucker. Furthermore, we will tolerate no blanket ban on women who are, after all, the civilising force of the world. I believe we have found our niche, Tilde.

You are, no doubt, hankering over details of my latest poetry exploits. Yes, indeed, who would not be? Such a grand story, such heights and troughs! Well, you will know merely that Mr Barrington Knox read my little offering and 'quite liked' it, selecting two or three (he is not sure which) for inclusion in the next issue of Strident at a payment of TBC. Edith is hysterical with excitement. I don't know whether to like her more for her enthusiasm or less. So long as her husband respects her opinion, I suppose all is well! Still, it has strained the friendship somewhat and the sherry libations are a little more measured, a little more business-like. There's much more stroking of Knox's moustaches (him, as he thinks) and close serious talk. Still, unlike at the Parishes', I am at least taken seriously!! Two (or three) poems for proper, real publication, Tilde!! I don't care if I don't earn a cent!

I should not be so complaining of Mr Parish, of course. He has been of immeasurable help to R. The CAS artists who have shown their loyalty in our opening weeks, and talked us up, and given us their business — they are all of Mr Parish's acquaintance or patronage. It is he who gets behind us, who believes in us. (By us, I mean R. But you know that. Oh, I wish I were a better specimen of human being who did not rankle at being ignored...)

Love Veda x

20 April 1955

Dear Tilde

Susan Mavis asks to be remembered to you. Do you remember Susan? She is now Mrs Gordon Bridie, and lives in Malvern, and, it seems to me, has a life of solid luxury. She came to dinner after seeing *The Sleeping Prince* and was most surprised to find me at the helm of the newest, buzzing, most fashionable restaurant in Melbourne. She herself, she says, is a practising watercolourist. She does not call herself an artist, so I imagine she must be a painter of decorative wall-hangings for spare-rooms, nicely framed in neat little gilt frames. Anyway, she is now wife of Gordon Bridie, architectural historian and founder of the Melbourne Gallery. Old money, but good taste. She was dressed in the most divine Hall Ludlow gown, still has her perfect button nose, and a figure like a rose on a long stem. Gorgeous, maddening creature. No children. She said this in a sad little whisper so I am guessing this is not because she has not tried. Gordon-Bridie is a patrician gent, twenty years older than her, but affable, gracious — like a fat darling old uncle who spoils you terribly and pays your school fees. Liked him immensely. She is still as we knew her at school. Lovely on the outside but can't help an occasional claw puncturing the silken surface. I told her you were fantastically happy, had simply a glut of children, including one absolutely beautiful daughter just married (that was churlish, was it not?). And she told me about her house in Malvern, holiday house in Portsea, and the 'lovely little flat' they have just purchased in Nice. Grrrr. Anyway, she is now properly remembered to you, and I should be perfectly happy to meet with her again, now I know the score!

Send me a lovely gossip letter about you and yours, will you? I am home a lot on my own during the day now. I can't abide going to parks and talking to other mothers, pushing swings and making sure children aren't clouted in the face by flying see-saws... it is tedious beyond description. Instead I entertain Owen by popping him on the grass in the front yard with some dirt and a spoon and some water and saucepans and let him get as muddy as he can, while I gaze and potter and write a

word or two, and snatch poisonous plants out of his grip. (It is a fabulously lush garden, just brimming with poisonous flora.)

What I'm saying, in my usual long-winded way, is I'm not getting much company during the day, and I need to live vicariously through you and your busy flock of childer and tireless rounds of country life, good works, tea-parties, cattle auctions, etc &etc.

I have marked you on the calendar for 3rd, 4th, 5th, and 6th of November and I'm going to hold you to it!

Love Veda x

18 May 1955

Dear Tilde

Well, you're not going to believe the latest. I have had a particular, personal visit from Mrs Parish, with a particular, personal objective that has left me in a very strange state indeed.

She 'phoned me on Monday, and informed me she was in town the next day and would like to take me to tea. Could she pick me up in the car at 11:30? (Well, she could take me anywhere in that car! It is about the most luxurious thing I have ever travelled in, and, to be honest, Tilde, should I die a rich woman, I have sometimes thought I would like to be buried in that vehicle!)

She came at 11:30 and drove Owen and I to tea-rooms in Glenferrie. Owen was meek as a lamb, repeating 'car' 'car' ad infinitum and making engine sounds all the way there. For his good behaviour, he got an enormous chocolate éclair that he made short work of, and warm milk in a cup. I had a vanilla slice that was pure delight, and

coffee. Mrs Parish had a plain scone and weak tea. (It makes me sad to think she can’t lash out and have, at least, a bit of butter and jam!)

But that is so far from the point of our meeting... Mrs Parish was clearly ill-at-ease the whole time: very serious, and embarrassed, and speaking so low it was hard to hear her. She had a proposition to put to me, she finally said. She and her husband had talked it over. They liked us very much, R and I. They loved Owen as if he were their own. They had much more money than they needed, and no children. So, what they proposed — and here, Tilde, I experienced a shiver up my spine — was to invest in Owen’s future via a mutually beneficial scheme: they would open a Trust Fund for his future, and into it deposit an amount of £17 per month until he was 21, if we would agree to allow them to become his legal ‘guardians’.

Well, Tilde, lucky I had et my slice by this point because I suddenly lost all appetite. “Guardians?” I said. “And what do you mean by ‘guardians’?” Here she became all pink and unhappy and said, “We would like him to be, in some formal way, a part of our family.”

I don’t know where she got the idea that guardianship of a child might be ‘bought’ in this way over tea and scones, but I restrained my mounting sense of offence, and asked for details. She wants, she said — they want — merely to act as de facto ‘uncle and aunt’ to Owen. To have him on weekends and holidays. To give him some of the advantages they can offer: a really good education, good connections, country air, holidays abroad.

Tilde, right now, I don’t know how I feel about all this. At the time, I was so angry it was all I could do to keep seated and civilised in my conversation. But after, in the car, I felt my heart go out to her. Just looking at her in the driver’s seat, her stooped back as she drove, the spidery grey hairs amongst the black, the stiff collar of her coat — I started feeling sorry for her. How old must she be? Getting on for fifty, is my guess. Stuck for life with a man who, despite his intelligence, his eloquence, his artistic discernment, is not warm, is not loving... I thought of her, quietly working her Japanese flower arrangements in that big cold quiet house, and I couldn’t help

imagining how much joy a child's ringing voice would bring, how much warmth Mrs P has to give, and yet no object for it...

We took our leave from the car and I imagine she probably sobbed all the way home. I certainly sobbed when I got inside.

I haven't even told R yet. What should I do? I am all crinkled up with pain and empathy.

Write me wisely!

Love Veda x

5 June 1955

Dear Tilde

I'm looking at Owen right now as I write, and I am putting him in his nicest warm jacket and the only pants without mends, and sending him off to the Parishes' for the weekend.

While he's gone, I will work on a new poem that is threatening to become something of an epic — a long poem, structured in many stanzas, mainly free verse (though there is of course no such thing — I am with Mr T. S. Eliot on this). I have the corner of the living room set up, with a lamp on a coiled metal neck that I can adjust to suit me, and a pile of books to refer to (*Aurora Leigh* on top). A desk with a nice polished surface, and several drawers for my pencils, and notebooks, and bits of paper, and pins, and photographs, and glasses. It is the nicest workspace I have ever had. And yet I have no inclination to sit down and work there. No inclination whatsoever. All I can think of is the car coming for Owen at noon, and being without him the whole of the weekend, and what will happen when he wakes in the night and I'm not there to come into the bed? He's so little that to send him off on his own like this seems heartless. It will all be strange to him. Strange dinner, strange bedtime, strange bedclothes.

R is practical about the arrangement, and makes me see sense: it is only for a weekend, after all. It will give me time to work — my common complaint, but just perhaps not so pressing as I thought. Instead, I am worried about the dam on the Parishes’ property, and Owen’s propensity to put things in his mouth — buttons and coins and things. I am always on the alert for this, but Mrs Parish will not be. What does she know about raising children? She knows absolutely nothing, Tilde!

Yes, R is quite right that it will give me time to work, to meet with Barrington and Edith and talk without interruption. He is quite right that our own parents live too far away for Owen to have a proper relationship with them (though I will travel to Armidale early next year). Yet I know there is another unspoken consideration at play in R’s reassurances — and that is the centrality of Mr Parish to his schemes. R is talking of leasing the small shopfront next to the restaurant, and setting it up as an exhibition space. A gallery specialising in prints and works on paper. Mr Parish is to be his principal advisor and investor — he will consult on who to show, he will make sure the exhibitions are written up in *The Age*, he will get artists signed up. He will pay the bond and part of the rental. He is pivotal to the whole scheme.

So, in other words, I am trapped.

You are right when you say that mothers get too caught up in their children. You are probably right too when you say that, when I have had more children, I will be less anxious. But I am not sure I will have more children. And Owen is so small. And what sort of a mother gives her child away to another woman? Oh, I know that’s not what I’m doing. But it feels like that. I feel sure that, were I to confide in any woman other than you — if I were to tell her of this arrangement — I would become a very suspect creature indeed.

Anyway, there are no ‘legal’ guardianship papers drawn up as such, though I expect that that will come.

To be honest, Tilde, I think I shall spend the whole of the weekend at a loss. I won’t be able to do a thing. Certainly I won’t be able to turn my head to poetry. I will be

worrying every minute, and chastising myself, and wondering whether I ought just to take a taxicab out to Park Orchards and check that all is well. I can't see myself being very welcome if I did turn up, of course. R says to come and work at the restaurant, and I might very well take him up on it, because there will be nothing but empty silent rooms here.

Must go. I think I hear the car. Wretched thing. I now consider it a kind of hearse.

Veda x

10 July 1955

Dear Tilde

Owen is in the hospital!! You won't believe my stupidity. I am an utterly negligent mother! It is so like me to have a stupid thoughtless accident that injures my own child.

This is what happened: On Sunday night, I made soup for Mrs Mathers. I had just taken it off the stove and was carrying it to her house in my big blue enamel pot. I'd made a little apple pie too, and Owen was carrying it on a plate, but he stumbled and dropped it and started crying, and so I put the soup-pot down on the ground to help him. But the pot went down on something not flat, on stones or rubble or something, and it simply tipped — so fast, Tilde! — and the hot soup went all over Owen's legs. I rushed him straight to the garden tap and ran cold water on his legs. And then I made a cold bath and held him in it for a whole half hour — you have no idea how hard it was to keep my nerve, Tilde, he just screamed and screamed til I was sobbing. I don't even know how I knew to keep him in the water that long, but they said at the hospital it was the best thing I could have done and will prevent the worst sort of scarring. Thank god for small mercies! But oh Tilde, he is wrapped from knee to ankle in bandages, and they had to give him morphine to get him to sleep.

I am utterly wretched. What sort of a mother am I? I should give him up entirely to the Parishes. I don't think I deserve to be a mother at all.

Send me something, darling Tilde, to make me feel better. I am wretched, and Owen is in the hospital all by himself for at least the next two nights

Veda x

15 July 1955

Dear Tilde

Thank you so much for your telegram, which soothed like angelic balm my tortured nerves. Yes, I am being melodramatic, but the whole thing has been melodramatic!

Owen is now home, tottering around quite happily, but every glimpse I get of those white bandages, I shudder. They've assured me at the Children's that the burns are mild and will not scar because of my 'quick-thinking' with the cold water, but that is not sufficient to ease my conscience. (Although I must admit, when I see the little children with Polio in at the hospital, I feel Owen we have been let off lightly.)

Owen and I have been quietly recuperating at home. I don't think I deserve sherry-drinking and literary self-congratulation for some time, so I have been avoiding the Knoxes, though Edit writ me a kind little note. Mr and Mrs Parish too have been very restrained and kind, though I am sure a part of them is thinking: thank goodness the child has a pair of reliable guardians on hand now! Mrs Parish bought Owen three lovely books, and has promised there will be a kitten next time he goes to theirs.

So I am feeling chagrined and grateful and regretful all at once. I have written three blubbering poems that I have immediately torn up, and I have now set myself to child-safing the house — ammonia and methylated spirits up high on a shelf, medicines in a locked cupboard, toys with detachable, swallowable pieces hidden

away, sharp table corners padded with wads of masking tape... R laughs at me, but I'm sure he wouldn't if he were responsible for these hideous bandaged legs!

Strident comes out next month, with two of my poems in it: 'Slumber' and 'Entitled'. There is an event to mark the publication at the bookshop, with all contributors invited. I will go, of course, but the whole thing seems somewhat of an ordeal right now.

Don't worry about me, though. I will recover. I'm not about to go into a slump, I promise you. But if you can possibly, possibly commit to those November dates, I will be eternally grateful. I need to see my older, wiser, more practical sister: she makes me feel a little less stupid in the world!

Love Veda x

1 September 1955

Dear Tilde

I am in something of a slump now, after all. The papers are drawn up, and Mr and Mrs Parish are Owen's legal guardians. A trust account has been set up for Owen, with monthly deposits to be made starting the beginning of next month. It really feels most sickening. And yet, perhaps it is all wise and practical. Ideally, if something were to happen to R and I, I would of course have wanted Owen to go to you. I hope you are not offended by the arrangement? I couldn't bear that.

I am trying to think of Mrs P like a sister. Not a real sister like you, but a much older, more distant sister — something between a sister and an aunt. Certainly, I have no reservations about her treatment of Owen — she is firm and loving, and never oversteps herself when I am there, defers to me &c. She has arranged a beautiful little room for Owen next door to her own (they have their own rooms, Mr and Mrs P), so she can hear him in the night. A bed piled high with soft toys, and wallpaper sporting a design of motorcars and aeroplanes. A. A. Milne's 'Vespers' in a frame above the

bed. Owen loves it and wants to go straight to his room as soon as he gets there, apparently.

So, all is well, and yet a piece of me feels stuck and choked beyond description.

R is taking me out, as a present, to cheer me up. We're going to the theatre, would you believe? He is making me dress up — has even sent me into town to go shopping — and has taken the Saturday night off, and we are going to the Union theatre to see Ray Lawler's *Summer of the Seventeenth Doll* and are then going dancing. (God forgive me, can I even remember how?)

It all sounds exotic and fun, doesn't it? But I am in a slump, and couldn't even be bothered trying anything on in Georges this afternoon. It all seemed too much effort. And the decision-making exhausted me in anticipation. I should've taken a girl-friend so we could have been excited and girly together and then gone and had lunch in the Myers caf. But then I realised I didn't actually have anyone to take. Once upon a time, Mrs P would've been a good practical, critical companion on such an excursion. She has style and knows quality when she sees it. Edith Knox doesn't care a fig about fashion and would adore any old thing I held up to her to admire. Mrs Gordon Bridie, I hear you thinking... No, Susan looks so brilliant in everything herself that I really couldn't spend an afternoon playing second fiddle to her.

So, actually, I needed you. And without you, I didn't buy anything and R got rather cross with me when he came home and I had nothing to show.

Bring on November: the warm weather, the horses, the champagne! It's been an appalling winter, and no sign of letting up yet. The cold has eaten into me this year, Tilde. Next winter I am coming up to you for a long stay,

Love Veda x

17 October 1955

Dear Tilde

So: Owen's bedroom is made spotless for you and Frank. I have aired all the linen. I have borrowed the most exquisite silk eiderdown from Mrs Parish, and pillows full of duck-feathers for you. Fruit-bowls are full. Refrigerator gleaming and purring and ice-trays laden. Bottle of Dry Gin and bottle of Vermouth. R has his olive supplier on notice.

I am planning chicken, mayonnaise and tarragon sandwiches for the Big Day (the tarragon is a trick of R's) — nothing too fancy, easy to eat. But we can talk more on that and refine our luncheon plans when you are here. (Susan has invited us to her marquee, but while I am keen to drop in and say hello, I'd much rather spend the afternoon plebb'ing it on the grass with you.)

R will meet your train at Spencer Street — he is in town by lunch-time every day — and will then deposit you on the number 42 tram. You are to get off at Stop 31, Barkers Road cutting — where Owen and I will be waiting for you, hopefully in the sun and not under big stinking umbrellas, looking sorrowful and limp and desperate. Who knows, though? This is Melbourne. The weather could be any old way.

We are invited for dinner at the Parishes on the Monday night — it's semi-formal, not that I have to warn you to pack the right thing to wear, for you always make the correct decisions on that count without my help. I am planning to frock up on Cup Day, but only to a point. (I ended up returning to Georges and getting myself a nice floral print with a wide belt, good cut, sleeveless. I know how these Spring Carnivals play out, though — all those foolish women freezing themselves to the bone just for the sake of fashion. Well, I bought a white cotton cardigan too. I would rather be a little bit comfortable than a little bit freezing cold. Does that mean I'm becoming middle-aged?)

I hope Frank has been studying the form guide? I have my money on Rising Fast again. But so has most of Melbourne, I believe. He did so well at the Caulfield (did you read it in the papers?)

The Parishes will have Owen for two nights, which is really very handy, and he will be dropped back on the Wednesday morning. So quite a little holiday for me — though sad for you who will no doubt want to eat him up and squeeze him til he bursts etcetera and will not get quite the opportunities you hoped for. The bandages have just come off, Tilde, and there is a mark the size of a penny on one shin, and that is all! I feel I have been thrown a rather large Get Out of Jail Free card.

On other topics: I suppose you have noticed that this two-sheet missive is accompanied by a slim journal with the name Strident in yellow and red across the top? Have you also noticed, beneath the masthead, somewhat small, but near the top (purely on account of alphabetical order) the name 'Veda Dray'? You have? Well, yes, I have included a copy of my real-life publishing debut. Put it away safely! One day it may be worth a shilling or two. I have maintained my maiden name for publication purposes because, for goodness' sake, I don't want to be mobbed in the streets, Tilde!

Read the poems. Say nothing if you don't like them, and shower me with praise if you do. There will be more, I hope, so long as Mr. Knox keeps his business sense about him and doesn't go bust (I have never seen a man give away his wares so generously! Someone merely has to mention a vague interest in modern poetry, and Knox is piling them up with 'super' examples. I believe it alarms Edith. She is the one counting the till and doing the stock inventories. She and I will have a little word about keeping Barrington on track. I don't want to lose my patron just as I've found him!)

The launch was great fun in the end. A small group of devotees and contributors, tea and cake and sherry, a speech by Mr Knox, lots of sales and autographs splashed across title pages. (I must come up with a better flourish. Something utterly unreadable. My signature looks like it did in the fifth form, all taut and schoolmarmish.)

See you on the 3rd!

Love Veda x

15 November 1955

Dear Tilde

Having you here was so wonderful! I have decided we are definitely coming to you for Christmas. R is not happy about it. The Parishes are not happy about it. But right now I really don't care. Owen and I are going to spend Christmas Eve and Christmas Day and the whole week up to New Years with you and Frank and Marigold and Christopher and the whole raggie-taggle lot of you.

I have been pushed and pulled this way and that about it ever since you mentioned the possibility. But I really feel I need to get away. Everything presses in on me so here. Sometimes I feel this terrible pressure that doesn't even seem to be about anything. I know there's nothing really difficult about my life. In fact, it's going pretty grandly, if I look at it from the outside. L'esperimento is a complete hit. For the first time ever, our rent and bills are paid every month without a second thought. Meanwhile, Barrington Knox is enthused about the long work I am planning (it's sort of a verse novel, though I only have a handful of opening poems at this point — am keeping them as self-contained as possible to make sure they can be published as solitary entities). Owen is well — on the weekend we took him to Half-Moon Bay in Sandringham and he had his first proper seaside experience, followed by very sandy fish and chips.

And yet, I feel a little on my own with things. R doesn't share the same worries as me, and I must admit I can't be bothered getting myself too exercised about his worries either. Are you and Frank like that? Do you get excited when he starts talking cow-flesh and wheat prices? (I bet you don't.) And does he read the children books at bedtime and make sure they brush their teeth and drink their milk and change their socks and have their baths? I don't expect R to do all those things, I just wish he would be a little bit more part of the family. It feels like Owen and I are the family, the couple, and R is some kind of satellite creature who orbits us from a distance. The

restaurant is long late hours. He sleeps through the mornings and is then up and shaved and off. I need a sense of family, and though the Parishes once provided something close to that, it has now, as you know, become different, more complex.

I need to escape. So we will come for Christmas. Tell me what to bring. I hope, of course, that R will close the restaurant and come too. But he hates trains, and he hates buses, and he doesn't know what to do with himself on a farm. Owen and I are coming anyway. I have already bought our tickets. Escape looms large and delicious on the horizon and I don't care what vexation I cause to anyone else. I will see you on the 23rd, the 6:10 pm. I will be the one in the enormous straw hat carrying the sleepy child covered in orangeade. Oh Tilde, I can't wait!

Love Veda x

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