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WRITING ABJECTION: JANICE GALLOWAYS'S *THE TRICK IS TO KEEP ON BREATHING*

Trash

«To my knowledge,» Ted Hughes reported
of Sylvia Plath, «she never scrapped any
of her poetic efforts.» In the end

it was herself she threw, bright torment
that she was, while we move rather more
reluctantly toward an unknown finale,

each one dripping and dropping off debris,
involuntarily donating the body piecemeal
to the failing cause of its own renewal:

wet kleenex, sanitary napkins, towels
diapering blood, feces, the milky phlegms;
spit hitting the earth like a slap;

eyelashes, nail slivers, razor peppers,
and 40 hairs a day, more or less, flying
off from each of us (where is it all?)

Margaret Holley

The extract from Margaret Holley's poem talks of abjection, which is what the subject voluntarily or involuntarily throws away or expels from her body. By doing so, she creates a boundary between self and other, and between inside and outside. This boundary is not stable: the other can become «alien» and ultimately threatening to self. In Holley's poem, abjection is necessary for the renewal and rebirth of the body. The persona's body releases what is old and superfluous in order to allow it space for further growth, and in order to achieve what Julia Kristeva defines as the «clean and proper body»: a necessary condition if the body is to represent the Symbolic Order. According

to Kristeva in *Powers of Horror* (1982), the abject can be experienced in various ways. For example, it can be related to bodily functions (as is the case in the above poem) or it can be related to the abjection of the mother's body when the child takes up its position as a speaking subject in the Symbolic Order, or it can be inscribed in a symbolic religious economy. Food loathing gives way to abjection through vomiting; menstrual blood is defined as abject in the Bible, and becomes a religious form of bodily pollution; even lying, hypocrisy and all crimes which are premeditated and are «immoral, sinister, scheming and shady» (Kristeva 1982: 4) are abject because they point to the fragility of the law. The abject is:

a border; abjection is above all ambiguity. Because, while releasing a hold, it does not radically cut off the subject from what threatens it – on the contrary, abjection acknowledges it to be in perpetual danger (Kristeva 1982: 9).

Abjection does not respect the laws of the Symbolic Order. It threatens and disturbs identity, truths, and systems and, as such positions the speaking subject in a constant tug-o'-war between the Symbolic and abjection.

Holley's poem starts off with a reference to Sylvia Plath's abjection of self: the throwing away of her own life, the annihilation of self. Janice Galloway's novel, *The Trick is to Keep Breathing*, published in 1989, is a similar tale of abjection to Plath's *The Bell Jar*. In the novel, written in the first person singular, Joy Stone, a young primary-school drama teacher, suffers from shock and consequently, depression, due to her lover's sudden death while both were in Spain on holiday. Back home, she experiences extreme abjection in the form of anorexia nervosa and several unsuccessful suicide attempts. She decides to enter a mental hospital for a period of a few months, where her recovery is slow, but she does recover. As one of the blurbs on the back cover of the novel states, its heroine struggles «for order and meaning [...] and] exposes how close we all of us are to insanity» (Harriet Gilbert, «The Listener»). It is my intention in this article to analyse the manifestation of abjection in Galloway's novel, in relation to the body and in the relation mother / daughter. I will then attempt to link up this discussion with A. L. Kennedy's short story, «A Perfect Possession», in which the parents of a small boy bring him up through abjection.

Joy Stone views her body always from the outside, as a spectator, never seeing herself as whole but as a jumbled mixture of separate parts over which she seems to have no control. She watches herself from the corner of her living-room and she smiles at herself in the mirror, but without recognising the woman she sees. She feels her lips moving as they repeat her story to the psychiatrists and to her sister, letting «the story come out in [a] disembodied glass voice» while she «listened, out of harm's way in the corner of the room» (104). Our language has colloquial expressions for this ego split: she hasn't been feeling herself lately; I wasn't really myself; I am not one with myself, it wasn't like me to do that. In humanistic discourse, all these expressions would seem to refer to an «authentic self» which is permanent, and in control, and a «temporary self» which often escapes control and acts independently. But in the case of Joy Stone I

believe that the self is written as a precarious and conflictual construction of conscious and unconscious desires and experiences which she lives through in her contact with others. Aware of the importance of the written word, Joy Stone keeps a diary which becomes a colourful mosaic of logical reasoning and the language of the Symbolic on the one hand, contained in the equations, debates, dialogues and lists and, on the other hand, the semiotic expressing desire, in the form of fantasies, dreams, nightmares and horoscopes. This split is maintained in the layout of the diary: sometimes she carefully writes in the day of the week, at other times she leaves pages unnumbered, but always separating one entry from another with three small 0's: 000. Seemingly unimportant, the 0's turn up in the middle of a blank page in the word «oops», the page just after one of her half-hearted suicide attempts and the one just before the announcement of her birthday. She slips into another year of life, also half-heartedly. The O is the exact centre of both her names: Joy Stone. She once refers to her weekend job as a bookie that «punching slips all day knocks holes in me». The O relates her to two other women who suffered mental breakdown: Ophelia and Anna O. The O and the circle bring to her mind the recurring image of her dead lover, fished out of the swimming-pool, lying on his back and surrounded by men standing in a «rough O», looking down at him. Michael's mouth is «a red O», white water flows through his hair. Michael is dead, but is his death an accident or is it her fault? Through death, Michael has become the abject body: his body having fallen «beyond the limit – *cadere*, *cadaver*» (Kristeva 1982: 3). The memory of Michael's mouth, and the suspicion that she might be to blame for his death, set Joy Stone on a process of bodily infliction which results in anorexia.

Anorexia nervosa has almost become an epidemic today in western societies as it was in Britain around the turn of the last century when, according to Showalter, many women starved themselves in order to embody the ideal of the «incorporeal Victorian angel» (Showalter 1987: 129). In Galloway's novel, Joy Stone's decision to stop eating seems to be the result of projecting her lover's death and abjection upon herself. In a sense, she gains something through this. Joy Stone recognises that she gains a status of power. In the following passage, she writes of herself in the third person singular:

This is of the essence. The defendant is afraid of health. There is a certain power in illness she is reluctant to relinquish for the precise reason it lets folk off the hook. People do not visit the unsick. The defendant's entirely selfish interest in the state of sickness is undisputed. Ergo

The logic of the thing is

the logic of the thing

the logic is (200).

The defendant is herself, the judge is herself; she, herself, is on trial for a crime she cannot define but which she feels she is guilty of. In the funeral service for Michael, a married man, she realises that Michael's life is being exorcised of a stain and the stain

is herself. Dirt is no longer something which is out there, it has crossed the boundaries and invaded her own consciousness:

Look, I am not a bad woman. I have committed no act of malice. But everything I touch turns bad. Christmas is coming and I have nothing to give. The house is dirty and sluttish. The outside drains are clogged with putrid apple pulp from the last time I made jam. I can't work out how to shift it. It gets worse every day (177).

The abjection of her own body and the «sluttish» house are intimately related in her fantasies. When her lover left his wife and children and moved into her damp cottage with her they found that the cottage was being silently invaded by «baby» mushrooms, that multiplied in the night «by the thousand thousand». When cut, they left «a little pink trail like anaemic blood». Both become obsessed by this house which «was being eaten from the inside by this thing» (65). The home has become unhomely, «unheimlich» / uncanny, and Joy begins to have trouble sleeping. It is shortly after this episode that they both go to Spain and where Michael's death occurs. The grotesqueness of the womb-like cottage remains with Joy after Michael's death but is projected onto her own body. The word, «grotesque» has its origins in the grotto (grotto-esque): «low, hidden, earthly, dark, material, immanent, visceral». The grotesque, according to Mary Russo, is identifiable with «the cavernous anatomical female body» (Russo 1994: 1). The grotesque, womb-like cottage which Joy also abjects and eventually leaves for a council house, brings Joy back to her origins, her mother's womb. As Freud put it, when discussing the relation between the uncanny and female genitals, «This *unheimlich* place, however, is the entrance to the former *Heim* [home] of all human beings, to the place where each one of us lived once upon a time and in the beginning» (Creed 1993: 54). «Hyster» is Greek for «womb». The belief of the ancient Greeks, that female hysteria was linked to a wandering womb, thereby causing bodily fluids to dry up, lasted for many centuries. As Joy Stone's body begins to collapse, her mental illness worsens. Her gums bleed, her teeth become loose, her knuckles bleed, she vomits after eating, and then ultimately her obsessive body-cleansing gives way to allowing the dirt to take over. The dirt grows and invades her space; she loses sense of her boundaries. Her anorexia stops her menstrual bleeding, and the doctors suspect she may be pregnant. A scan proves she is nothing but «a green cave», or «a black hole among the green stars. Empty space» (unnumbered / 146).

By concentrating and controlling what goes into her body she also becomes aware of how she is being controlled by others. By denying her body food she walks a tightrope between life and death. Her repeated whispered plea «What will I do while I am lasting?» acts as a leitmotiv which brings her closer to the appalling awareness that her «problem» is possibly her mother's fault:

The Evidence:

1. My maternal grandmother died in a house fire. [She deliberately left an electric fire burning in the corner of the room].

2. Aunt Connie took an overdose of painkillers. [...].

3. My aunt Iris jumped over an iron parapet onto a railway track. [...]

4. One of the cousins (I forget which) drove into a wall at fifty miles an hour. [A female cousin].

5. My mother walked into the sea. Not the first time she tried something like that but the most unusual one. it didn't kill her. She had time to come round and have four heart-attacks in hospital first. [...] Two days back home she had another attack and smashed her head when she fell on the fire surround.

[...]

The men are less interesting: coronary thromboses, bronchial disorders, mining accidents. Even some natural causes. With my father it was booze. That has possibilities (199).

According to Kristeva, a child's sexual identity is formed through the struggle to become independent from the mother's body. The boy child abjects the mother's body and usually encounters no difficulty in forming his sexual identity as he is different. The girl child sees herself as same and is seen as same by the mother. She, therefore, has more difficulty in taking up a position in the Symbolic Order. Further, Kristeva maintains that sexual difference ultimately influences the subject's relationship to the language of the semiotic chora. Females who remain too close to the maternal semiotic (preverbal language) will not be able to use the semiotic for revolutionary purposes as well as males can. Is Joy Stone's real problem that she has not quite managed to abject the mother? It is important to note at this point that when Kristeva discusses the abjection of the mother she does not mean the mother as woman but the mother's body. The mother's body becomes a site of conflict in the relation mother/child. In order to become an autonomous subject, the child must abject the mother's body although it desires to remain in a symbiotic relationship with her. Joy Stone's mother died but the mother still lives on in her sister Myra, who visits Joy and causes such a panic in her that she brushes her teeth till her gums bleed. Myra and her mother (Joy's and Myra's) were both pregnant at the same time. The mother gave birth to Joy. Myra's baby died. Myra and Joy become «Blood sisters. Sisters grimm». Her entry into the house verges on the sinister:

Myra whirled in from the black outside, like a dervish: her hair completely grey. I had to look twice but it was Myra all right. Older. I had never thought to see Myra looking older. Her makeup had run into coaldust triangles while she had been waiting outside in the howling gale and the rain for someone to come and let her in. Her nose was red as a bitten thumb (60).

It is Joy who opens the door to let her in. Allowing entry to, or inviting the monstrous Other over the threshold, is often the same as becoming monstrous oneself and she does eventually see herself as monstrous (191). She becomes afraid of going sour, «something about me kills people» – she writes, «I'm not a proper woman. I no longer menstruate. Sometimes I think I don't exist» (105).

If she cannot give birth to herself, she at least attempts to connect with the language of jouissance (her name is Joy), and gives birth to the language of the womb, which subverts the hierarchic position between the doctor and herself:

Cold spots dripped on my upturned palms but I didn't feel it was me crying. I could find no connection between these splashes and me. I connected only with the words. They swelled and filled up the whole room. I was eaten and swallowed inside those words, eaten and invisible. When it was over I knew I was smiling. I had been afraid of wasting his time but now I knew I had performed with dignity. From inside the belly of the words, Dr One looked meagre. He repositioned his specs because he felt uncomfortable and missed one of his ears (105).

Through mastering words she repositions herself as a speaking subject. Her abjection of self is mirrored in her abjection of words: on many pages of the diary the words slide off into the margins, some slide off the pages themselves. Sentences are left unfinished, many pages are unnumbered, she draws a blank, she watches her pen «writing monstrous», she sits and looks out of her window, «convinced there's a detailed confession running over [her] forehead, secrets shaping up in braille gooseimples on [her] arms (100). Looking for the truth, or rather, truths of her own existence.

In Alison Kennedy's *Looking for the Possible Dance*, published in 1993, there appears a list of maxims titled «The Scottish Method (For the Perfection of Children)». Point 1 reads «Guilt is good»; Point 7, «Joy is fleeting, sinful and the forerunner of despair»; Point 9, «God hates us. In word, in thought, in deed we are hateful before God and we may do no greater good than to hate ourselves» (Kennedy 1993: 15-16). These maxims bring deeper insight to the conflict which Joy Stone experiences, her overwhelming sense of being guilty for the deaths of her mother, her sister's baby and her lover. The weight of this guilt turns Joy, herself, into the dervish she defined her sister as (191). But Joy's diary is filled with maxims too; towards the end she writes: «I will Take Advice and Try Harder. / Persistence is the Only Thing that Works / The More Something Hurts, The More it can Teach Me» (216). She has entered into a dialectic which will bring her closer to a greater tolerance of those aspects of herself that she formerly could not accept. She slowly recognises that her memory of Michael also changes in her fantasies. His mouth is no longer a red O, instead, his teeth have grown «unnaturally long, his eyes bright» (210) and she knows that she must now challenge his pulling her into a vampirical no-time zone between the memories of the past and a non-future. In a brilliantly written passage, she returns to the mushroom cottage to commit an act of murder, to start anew:

I turn the handle. Look inside. [...]. Paprika puffs around the toe of my shoe. [...] And there's something on the bathroom lintel, moving.

A flat-headed toadstool, wet beads glittering in the ruffle underside because it's so dark in here. I swear it swivels when it hears me coming. [...] The screw-driver tip catches the edge of my pocket and slides out. My hand rises level with

the mushroom cap. I watch the shaft sink easily into the soft head, turning with a faint clicking sound. The fungus slithers so far down the length of metal then heaves and drops, twisting once on the carpet before it lies still. Kitchen mushrooms hide near the skirting and above the jamb. They are safe today but not much longer (217).

Joy Stone stops the dry rot – a metaphor for the abjection of her body – from spreading. By doing so she also halts the transgression of Death (her Other, represented by Michael and her mother) crossing the boundary which divides it from life.

Abjection of the self can lead to an annihilation of the self but when the bodies of others are abjected or repudiated because of their sex or race or other markers, this leads to sexism, racism and homophobia. Klaus Theweleit's *Male Fantasies* explores the relation between fascism and male violence against women's bodies and female sexuality. In the Foreword, Barbara Ehrenreich writes that this hatred is a result of a «dread, ultimately of dissolution – of being swallowed, engulfed, annihilated. Women's bodies are the holes, swamps, pits of muck that engulf» (Theweleit 1987: XIII). This dread of women has its origin in the pre-Oedipal stage, before the child has an ego. Theweleit bases his theories on those of the child psychologist Margaret Mahler, who points out that the child's abjection of bodily fluids (urinating, defecating, coughing, sneezing, spitting and regurgitating) relieves tension and brings comfort. Nevertheless, if the child carer expresses disgust and displeasure in the child's body, that child will eventually conceive of itself as dirt and will develop a body of steel, impenetrable to any caress or affection.

Alison Kennedy's short story «A Perfect Possession» is also about abjection. It is a narration in the first person plural, but genderless, of two child carers who constantly talk of their love for the child and how they help him to be cleansed of sin and evil. What is so terrifying about this seven-page story is that the reader only gradually realizes that the normal gives way to the abnormal. This love becomes recognisable as a Puritanical «godfearing» love, represented by the maxim *cleanliness is next to godliness*. The child becomes the defiling Other who – reduced to a *which* – could pollute the clean and proper bodies of the narrating «we».

Our home is a clean home, free from tabloid sewage and the cheap and foreign pollution most people seem content to have wash around them all the day (6).

Many times in the night, we examine him for signs of filthiness, wetness of every kind, and often we are given cause for concern, or rather, we are challenged by sin (8).

«A Perfect Possession» as the title brilliantly suggests, is about a dispossessed child and possessed child-carers who bring up the child to abject and to dam in his body, to subdue it into a body of steel. This will ultimately isolate the child from other children and the adult from other adults. What makes this story similar to Janice Galloway's novel is the concern with subjectivity, the abject and boundaries. Indivi-

duals do not live in society as isolated individuals with clear-cut boundaries. They interconnect in a network of power relations where the boundaries which divide one individual from another are constantly shifting. As the feminist philosopher Jean Grimshaw writes: «The dialectic of autonomy is one in which a constant (but never static or final) search for control and coherence needs balancing against a realism and tolerance born out of efforts to understand ourselves (and others) better». (Grimshaw 1988: 106).

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