

THE SRPR REVIEW ESSAY:
BAD PLATH:
EXCESS AND THEATRICALITY IN CONTEMPORARY POETRY

JOHANNES GÖRANSSON

Dregs
Cynthia Cruz
Four Way Books, 2018
52 pages; paperback, \$15.95

Serenade
Brooke Ellsworth
Octopus Books, 2017
109 pages; paperback, \$14.95

Sea-Witch, Volume two (Girdirt Angelfog)
Moss Angel the Undying
2fast2house, 2017
120 pages, paperback, \$13.00

Automanias
Sara Tuss Efrik
Paul Cunningham, trans.
Goodmorning Menagerie, 2016
28 pages; paperback, \$10.00

The Night's Belly
Sara Tuss Efrik
Paul Cunningham, trans.
Toad Press, 2016
23 pages; paperback, \$5.00

1.

For more than fifty years after her death, Sylvia Plath has intrigued, outraged, and fascinated poets and critics in English-speaking countries and the rest of the world. Even within the same essays on Plath, writers will express both negative and positive views, often veering between the two with such intensity that it becomes hard to say what their views actually are. Perhaps most famously, Robert Lowell proclaimed that in her final poems, Plath “becomes herself” but she paradoxically also becomes something “imaginary, newly, wildly and subtly created—hardly a person at all, or a woman, certainly not another ‘poetess,’ but one of those super-real, hypnotic, great classical heroines” as “almost everything we customarily think of as feminine is turned on its head.”¹ He also compares her to a “hallucination,” “a racehorse,” and describes her as “machinelike.”² Plath becomes both herself and a whole host—an excess—of selves, or masks-as-selves. By decidedly undoing herself, Plath becomes a Deleuzian/Guattarian multitude. Along similar lines, former poet laureate of the United States Robert Pinsky describes how her poems seem to “[throw] off images and phrases with the energy of a runaway horse or a machine with its throttle stuck wide open.”³ Plath’s lack of restraint is destructive, violent, inhuman. Critics’ inability to properly evaluate Plath’s work says something profound about the way her poetry refuses to comply to standards of quality and decorum.

Other critics have been more straightforward in their critiques of Plath’s transgressions of good taste. Irving Howe accused her of “free-flowing hysteria,”⁴ and he denounced her hyperbolic metaphors as “monstrous.”⁵ Harold Bloom has frequently denounced her—in very

1 Robert Lowell, “Foreword,” in *Ariel*, by Sylvia Plath (New York: Harper & Row, 1966), xiii.

2 *Ibid.*, xiv.

3 Robert Pinsky, review of *Bitter Fame: A Life of Sylvia Plath*, by Anne Stevenson, *The New York Times*, August 27, 1989; <http://www.nytimes.com/1989/08/27/books/345889.html?pagewanted=all>.

4 Irving Howe, “The Plath Celebration: A Partial Dissent,” in *Sylvia Plath: The Woman and the Work*, ed. Edward Butscher (London: Dodd, Mead, 1979), 231.

5 *Ibid.*, 233.

gendered terms—as “an absurdly bad and hysterical verse writer.”⁶ George Steiner changed his mind from being impressed by Plath’s intensity and comparing “Daddy” to Picasso’s “Guernica,”⁷ to being made “uneasy” by her tasteless “death-rig.”⁸ Here we have the pattern of the condemned Plath, the “bad” Plath: hysterical, death-obsessed, feminine, gothic. In short, she is exactly what the US literary establishment has been condemning at least as far back as the New Critics. These critics merged ethics and decorum in their rejection of excess, as when I. A. Richards rejected mass culture’s “orgy of verbomania” because it interfered with his idealized model of communication.⁹ With her hysteria and her necroglamorous, outsized persona, Plath flaunted the economic restraint of decorum and undid the New Critical emphasis on impersonality.

There is a general unease about many seemingly hyperbolic aspects of Plath: there’s too much death, too much extreme imagery, too many metaphors, and, maybe just as importantly, too many readers with too many versions of her work. The fact that she’s so popular—especially among young women—is often held against her: a sure sign of her lack of taste. Taste of course is dependent on “restraint,” the thing Plath seems to tease and test most vigorously and to great effect. The criticism that she is too “theatrical” is repeated as if it were a truism that this is a negative thing. Notably much of the doubts about Plath has to do with the “I,” the word so frequently the subject of heated debate in US poetry over the past 100 years. Plath not only uses the word a lot but she also makes it notoriously hard to differentiate between Plath the person and the speaker of her poems.

6 Ellen Spierer, with Harold Bloom, “Candidates for Survival: A Talk with Harold Bloom,” *Boston Review* (February, 1989), <http://bostonreview.net/archives/BR11.1/bloom.html>.

7 George Steiner, “Dying is an Art,” in *Language and Silence: Essays 1958–1966* (London: Faber, 1985), 330.

8 George Steiner, “In Extremis,” in *The Cambridge Mind: Ninety Years of “The Cambridge Review”: 1879–1969*, eds. Eric Homberger, William Janeway, and Simon Schama (London: Cape, 1969), 305.

9 C. K. Ogden and I. A. Richards, *The Meaning of Meaning: A Study of the Influence of Language upon Thought and of the Science of Symbolism* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1923). Quoted in John Durham Peters’s *Speaking into the Air: A History of the Idea of Communication* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), 12.

Combined, these gestures create a body of work that runs counter to Eliotic and New Critical decorum.

Perhaps because of Plath's insistent popularity, many critics have tried to make Plath into something more acceptable. However, in their defenses of Plath, these critics tend to echo the same concerns as the critics who reject her, asserting the same aesthetics of decorum as her detractors. They argue that she indeed does possess restraint and control, that she is in fact a consummate craftswoman, not at all some out of control, tasteless confessional poet. The most prominent advocate in this line of thought is Helen Vendler, who has tried to make Plath palatable by abjecting this excessive Plath with her grotesque anatomies, her mass culture appeal, and cinephilia. An extreme example of this may be found in *Last Looks, Last Books*, in which Vendler argues that Plath's writing was "endangered" by "theatricalizing melodrama" and that only through "a deepening mastery of technique" she was able to overcome this "threat."¹⁰ Vendler creates a narrative arc where Plath improves by becoming more tasteful, ending with "Berck-Plague," where she is able to show restraint and "moral strength": "she aimed, as we shall see, at aesthetic control and moderation of expression in spite of the death-obsession within which she had to live and create."¹¹ Along similar lines, Megan O'Rourke argues that "[d]espite her popular image as a death-obsessed neurotic, Plath was among the most disciplined, driven, publicly ambitious American poets of the 20th century" (note that even the defenses against Plath's excesses tend to be excessive!), that she is "decidedly unadolescent" (not a poet for teenage girls after all!), not a narcissistic confessionalist ("Read through Ariel, though, and you will find that plenty of poems are not literally about Plath" and "anything but baldly confessional"), and that her poems are in fact difficult ("Her poems are actually hard to parse"), which is to say, she's a poet a New Critic could love.¹² However, like Vendler, O'Rourke finds that there are shortcomings in Plath: she's

¹⁰ Helen Vendler, *Last Looks, Last Books: Stevens, Plath, Lowell, Bishop, Merrill* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2010), 47–50.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 52.

¹² Meghan O'Rourke, "Poetry's Lioness: Defending Sylvia Plath from Her Detractors," *Slate* (October 28, 2003); http://www.slate.com/articles/arts/culturebox/2003/10/poetrys_lioness.html.

amateurish and “clumsy” when writing about the Holocaust; she uses too many “moons” and “stars” (an excess of the poetic kitsch); she had to rid herself of her affinity to “grotesque” imagery.¹³ Perhaps most importantly, O’Rourke argues that Plath “worked hard”—she was not freeloading, Whitmanian “loafer”!¹⁴ That is to say, in trying to save Plath, these critics create a “good Plath” and a “bad Plath.”

In this essay, I will privilege “bad Plath,” arguing along the way that in fact a lot of what makes the “bad Plath” bad (according to both her detractors and defenders) is what makes her a brilliant poet, and that it is these qualities that a burgeoning number of contemporary poets—both in the United States and from other countries—are in dialogue with. Against the desire to make Plath an “unadolescent” poet who works hard and follows rules, I see in the “bad Plath” a poet who might be more fruitfully positioned with such transgressive writers as the Dadaists and Surrealists, J. G. Ballard, Alejandra Pizarnik, Ann Jäderlund, Sophie Podolski, and, perhaps most importantly, writers who draw connections between gender and transgression, such as Kathy Acker, Julia Kristeva, and Hélène Cixous. From Surrealism and Dada, she inherited stylistic moves as well as the urge to blend mass culture with poetry (the use of montage, the emphasis on the “theatrical,” what Walter Benjamin saw as the Dadaists’ “ballistic” aesthetic and the Surrealists’ “profane illuminations”). We can, for example, see a very volatile use of montage in “Fever 103°,” where Hiroshima, orchids, and babies all bleed together in one feverish atmosphere.¹⁵ Or we can see it in the “striptease” of “Lady Lazarus,” a montage that both does the opposite and something similar to Hitchcock’s famous shower scene in *Psycho*: the cuts cut up the female body.¹⁶ By positioning her use of abjection with Julia Kristeva’s concept of the abject, we might not only understand her grotesque imagery, but also the critics’ mixture of fear and fascination. Most importantly, invoking Cixous, we might see in her extreme “confessionalism” a kind of transgressive *écriture féminine*: breaking the limits of patriarchal taste.

Although the US establishment has done its best to disparage bad

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ Sylvia Plath, “Fever 103°,” in *Ariel* (New York: Harper & Row, 1966), 53–55.

¹⁶ Sylvia Plath, “Lady Lazarus,” in *Ariel* (New York: Harper & Row, 1966), 6–9.

Plath, this figure does have strong lineage, starting perhaps with Judy Grahn's retelling of "Lady Lazarus" as a grotesque, feminist revenge pic in "I have come to claim / Marilyn Monroe's body," where she uses the dead actress's body parts to smash the male gaze.¹⁷ You can see it most clearly in US "gurlisque" poets, including Chelsea Minnis, Danielle Pafunda, Dorothea Lasky, Lara Glenum, Morgan Parker, Dylan Krieger, and Viddhu Agrawal. We can see it in Sade Murphy's violent, cinematic *Dream Machine*.¹⁸ Or in the actual poem-films of Ronaldo Wilson, whose Serena Williams avatar could be read as Lady Lazarus's fascinating opposite. Internationally, you can see it in the way feminist poets like Kim Hyesoon, Seungja Choi, and Kim Yideum have used Plath as a kind of model for anti-patriarchal, grotesque poetry following the fall of the dictatorship, wedding Plath to Kristeva and Cixous. Or you can see it in Swedish poet Aase Berg's early work, where guinea pigs teem like B-movie horror critters, or in Danish poet Olga Ravn's "witch school." This is poetry that has powerfully, excessively created fascinating and politically charged work out of exactly the kind of uncontrolled, death-jouissance aesthetics that US critics have tried so hard to clean from Plath and from US poetry.

2.

While it may seem logical to think of bad Plath as inherently maximalist, Cynthia Cruz picks up on the miniaturistic excesses of Plath. As Zachary Anderson notes in a review of Cruz's last book, *How the End Begins*, "Of all the images that constellate the dense personal mythology in *How The End Begins*, Cynthia Cruz's new collection, perhaps the one that best encapsulates the book is a 'tiny, frozen diorama, / With a black and wild piston in it.'"¹⁹ The quote not only invokes the petrified Gothic quality of both Plath and Cruz, the use of "tiny" and "frozen" suggests an excessive minimalism: too many words makes the diorama both too dioramatic and an exploded diorama. As Susan

¹⁷ Judy Grahn, "I Have Come to Claim Marilyn Monroe's Body," in *Edward the Dyke and Other Poems* (Oakland, CA: Oakland Women's Press Collective, 1971).

¹⁸ Sade Murphy, *Dream Machine* (Normal, IL: co•im•press, 2014).

¹⁹ Zachary Anderson, "On *How the End Begins* by Cynthia Cruz," Kenyon Review blog; <https://www.kenyonreview.org/reviews/how-the-end-begins-by-cynthia-cruz-738439/>.

Stewart notes in her work on miniatures, dioramas are not just tiny but frozen, as well, taken outside of history.²⁰ But it's exactly this tasteless flaunting of decorum that makes Cruz such a marvelous read.

Cruz's new book, *Dregs*, continues a lot of the imagery and the tasteless Plath-like obsession with doom and death. The title suggests the aftermath quality in a lot of these poems: like the previous collections, they are about the "end," but it's about an end that doesn't seem to want to end, to become narrativized but instead become decadent atmospheres in which the speaker lingers. If "tiny, frozen diorama" was the key phrase of the last book, "winter" might be the key term of this book. All the poems seem to take place in winter. Over and over again, the speaker seems to freeze—invoking Plath's famous "rocked shut as a seashell"—in a way that doesn't end / kill her but keeps her suspended in a kind of aftermath. (*Dregs*'s poems are frequently called "recreations," giving them both a feeling of "aftermath" and diorama.) The book is suspended in this "shimmering" or "glimmering" atmosphere, an atmosphere of startling visual saturation: "The blinding white arc of noon," "newly driven snow," "snow-blind of the mind."²¹ The winter becomes a beginning-of-the-end atmosphere, but it's also an atmosphere that makes everything sparkle, makes everything, so to speak, into art. "Winter Museum" begins with "white minks kept in glass cages" but soon take us to "a frozen and perfect / Akmatova winter." The "white minks" suggest a kind of decadence—nature turned into art—as if winter (here named after a poet) is the process of petrifying the world into art. As in Plath's "The Munich Mannequins," the winters of these poems cannot have children.²² They are not involved in what Lee Edelman so notoriously called "reproductive futurism."²³ They are just lingering in an end glimmering with art like the "silver milk" of "The Last Film in the World."

20 Susan Stewart, *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1992).

21 As I am working with a manuscript version of *Dregs*, I forego offering page numbers for quoted material.

22 Sylvia Plath, "The Munich Mannequins," in *Ariel* (New York: Harper & Row, 1966), 73–74.

23 Lee Edelman, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004).

If the time of these poems is winter, the location seems mostly to be a kind of cold war era—a “Hotel Berlin,” as one poem calls it. These poems take place in the same Cold War Berlin that was famously populated with decadent artists and musicians such as David Bowie and Iggy Pop (who famously lived in “Neuköln,” which is also the title of both a Bowie song and another poem in Cruz’s collection). The interregnum space of these poems are repetitive, hypnotized: they are not reaching any kind of epiphany.

Can a person get out of this kind of impasse? Does the speaker even want to? Cruz is ambivalent about this question. The key poem in this regard might be “Masquerade,” which begins, “Take the sheared / mink-coat off,” and proceeds—much like the poem “Foxina” by another “bad Plath” poet, Chelsey Minnis²⁴—to enumerate a list of lovely fabrics:

Take the sheared
Mink coat off,

The soft pink
Silk shift;

Black lace stockings,
Soft

Black leather
Ballet flats...

This montage of clothing (evocative of Kenneth Anger’s classic film *Puce Moment*) pits clothing against narrative: it stops progress. But unlike Minnis’s speaker, who describes herself as “rocking” various kinds of clothing (“the soufflé blouse,” “drop earrings,” etc²⁵), Cruz’s poem involves taking off the items in what we may call a Plathian “striptease,” until, after many lines, she can finally “... let the spell / Of God’s sweet orchestra / Finally / Enter me.”

One might read this ending in many ways, including as a kind of cathartic, perhaps even ritual, violence, or an urge for a narrative movement as inherently violent, religious. It might be useful to com-

²⁴ Chelsey Minnis, “Foxina,” in *Bad Bad* (New York: Fence Books, 2007), 84–99.

²⁵ *Ibid.*

pare Cruz's poem to Plath's "Fever 103°," in which the speaker's "old whore petticoats" of selves are removed one by one.²⁶ Although Cruz's poem lacks Plath's sardonic tone, both poets are writing a kind of "fever," an atmosphere in which it is hard to tell whether the stripping will result in something truly pure, or if that purity is a kind of saturation by art. What enters Cruz's speaker is sexual as well as religious: "God's sweet orchestra." The ecstasy of possession isn't diametrically opposed to art after all: it's another kind of art. Or it is the same art—"white annihilating music"—that put those clothes on her in the first place. While we might use Plath to read Cruz's poem, we might also use Cruz's poem to read the decadence back into Plath, frustrating the attempts to make out of Plath a "good poet" who learns restraint and moderation, learns to write about moral poems that will redeem her excesses. Cruz gives us a "bad Plath" that is never about overcoming the fundamental decadence of art. Over and over, Cruz generates a saturating atmosphere that refuses to give in to the urge to redeem art, to instrumentalize it, to turn it into something that improves us.

3.

Brooke Ellsworth is another excessive miniaturist in the Plath tradition, but she is different from Cruz in that her first book, *Serenade*, brings back Plath's sardonic and harsh tone, which Cruz had stripped from her version of Plath. Ellsworth's language is often precisely that of the most abject of bad-Plath figures: the teenage girl with the bad attitude. "I AM STUPID IN THIS HOUSE," reads the defiantly teenagery title of one poem (48). In many poems, the speaker is engaging in social media activities: "Would u believe I was sober when I typed in maenad killer bitch gif," she asks, invoking the Plathian juxtaposition of classic reference with crass pop culture and the grotesque (15). Ellsworth invokes "bad Plath" in the very first poem of her collection, "FLOWER," which compares a sunset to "Hiroshima," recalling Plath's "monstrous" metaphors in which the political horrors of Plath's time leak into her supposedly personal, confessional poems (13). In Ellsworth's second poem she summons "Fever 103°" by calling her "dreams" not quite "old whore petticoats" but, rather, "cheaters" (7). And, throughout, her diction is punctured by words

²⁶ Sylvia Plath, "Fever 103°," 55.

easily associated with Plath, such as “auguey string” instead of Plath’s “auguey tendon.” This might seem like a pointless exercise—“Find the Plath-Word—but it points to the way Ellsworth’s book makes me read it (and perhaps also to reread Plath) as a kind of cut-up or montage of a book. There is a sense of aggression against both reader and self, and most of all, text. This is writing as self-ruination. But out of this violence, beautiful and startling language appears.

Only recently have scholars begun to pay attention to the influence of Dada and Surrealism (montage, cut-ups, etc) on Plath—perhaps because these European movements are distinctly in opposition to the fundamental rules of US decorum. Collages and montages work by ruining the illusory autonomy of the artwork and—especially in Dada and Surrealism—by thus bringing the most unlike matters together, a bringing-together that charges up the writing with a grotesque energy. In Plath, we can see it in the “monstrous” way that suddenly Hiroshima can be brought into a poem about a fever (and a baby can turn into a “ghastly orchid,” which in turn gives an anatomical shape to the flower), how the Holocaust can be collaged into a poem about grieving one’s dad.

Ellsworth loves the scandalous effects of montage, as well. When she names a poem “ERASERHEAD,” she is not so much referencing David Lynch’s surrealist masterpiece as telling us how she might have composed her poems (44). Throughout there’s the torque-y charge between lines and words of a poem that seems to have been cut down and built back up. In the poem “EVICTION,” she writes in what might be a description of this scandalous use of montage: “A panic bombshell of meaning that cannot be fixed” (17). This “cannot be fixed” is a quality that ties Ellsworth to Cruz, in a “bad Plath” unity, even if their writing differs quite a bit. Recalling Leo Bersani, one might say that the poems do not “redeem” history.²⁷ If in the volatile climate of “Fever 103°,” the subject matter keeps shifting due to the scandalous montage, in Ellsworth’s “EVICTION,” the space of the poem keeps changing, “evicting” us so to speak continually: we may start out in “blue summer” but before long we are in a Peter Greenaway movie, where the famed director takes us into an “intestine track” before the

²⁷ Leo Bersani, *The Culture of Redemption* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1990).

speaker realizes that now “I’m at a party / where everyone’s dressed up like Peter Greenaway” (17). There is a kind of masquerade-effect to the feverish montage: one “whore petticoat” after another is shucked.

The poem “The Raving Ones” provides an *ars poetica* in the best “bad Plath” way. Here a Lady-Lazarus-like undead energy propels a breakneck monologue—the first line reads: “A private Act 1: I am a liar, I change, but I cannot die.” (15)—that ends in a kind of gothicized orphic reveal:

We couldn’t experience
our gashes
bc their distortion
blocked the way
and opened the way
to Orpheus’ skull
that we studied and
grew to love at
viral levels
My relic
stands still there
in the light we stand still here
to wife
the intermission (15)

If I want to read this as a self-conscious description of the poetics of the book, I might say that the “gashes” of the poem create distortions (like “panic bombshells”) that block models of poetic epiphany based on “communication.” Instead of listening to his music, the speaker has to literally dissect Orpheus’s skull, taking the cruelly sober bacchant as a model for a poetry that ultimately moves not in narrative progress, but a much flatter “viral” (anatomical or social media) movement. The poem ends with an example of this cut-up method: “wife / the intermission.” That is to say, it both joins the two halves that are usually cut by the intermission (that is, it marries them, so to speak) but also wifes, or joins, the intermission itself—the cut as poetry.

4.

In *Sea-Witch, Volume two (Girldirt Angelfog)*, Moss Angel the Undying assumes the position of Plathian monster, theatrically breaking rules of decorum left and right in order to create a vision of herself as a gay monster whose excesses reject the gender politics

of heteronormativity. As in Lowell's vision of Plath, Moss Angel's identity feels "wholly herself" but that identity is also incredibly fluid as she constantly changes in and out of names and figures. The book begins with a "cast of characters" (viii-x). We might expect from this an authoritative guide that will help us read the book, but the list is itself so long and at times highly incomplete and full of questions. The protagonist, Sara, we are informed to begin with is "only one of many Saras"; "Leg-witch" is "literally another witch's leg"; and the author is "not sure" who "Dead-Jellyfish-Witch" is (viii). This profusion and confusion of identities is enacted in the prose poems of the book, where some characters come out of other characters or live inside other characters. At one point, the speaker notes: "I don't know who I borrowed this voice from" (41). Voice is supposed to be the great connection to interiority (*The Voice That Is Great Within Us* was the name of a famous workshop anthology²⁸), but here it is another layer to the costumery that is both "herself" and something "imaginary." If the New Critical paradigm demands an impersonal persona-mask in order to properly communicate a stable interiority, Moss Angel the Undying rejects this model of authentic interiority, finding instead layer upon layer of masks—masks that may be as authentic to the person as any idealized idea of interiority.

Moss Angel takes Plathian iconophilia to the hilt, not only in the super-visual text but also in the accompanying photographs and graphics, images often depicting tattoos, which are then drawn over, as if the pages were triple-images or self-vandalized. The montage of parts of the author's body—hands, crotch, chest, etc—create an effect not unlike the striptease in "Lady Lazarus," but here it seems decidedly nonlinear, or as Carl-Michael Edenborg might call it, "parapornographic."²⁹ As in Edenborg's theory, there is a sense in which there is no outside to strip off, no inside to reveal: everything is body, inside and outside in constant convulsive exchange.

The tattoo becomes the central icon of art as physical, language as bodily violence: "I stabbed ink into my arm" (39). The crude drawings

28 *The Voice That Is Great within Us: American Poetry of the Twentieth Century*, ed. Hayden Carruth (New York: Bantam, 1983).

29 Carl-Michael Edenborg, *The Parapornographic Manifesto* (South Bend, IN: Action Books, 2013).

on the pages echo the tattoos. One tattoo says “Gay,” and in one of the poems, Moss-Witch tells Sea-Witch that the thing about art is that it is “mostly a bunch of gay shit” (53). The author’s body is marked as “gay,” as is the act of marking “Art.” Moss-witch is defined in large part by having “sharp needles for writing beneath your own skin,” having a violent relationship with language. Other photos show a tattoo of a kind of glyph—reminiscent of the “name” Prince took in order to get out of his exploitative record contract. It seems that the art of tattoos means something like a proliferation of secret languages and identities. In direct opposition to the kind of accessibility that US literary establishment seems to constantly call for, the code written on Moss Angel’s body suggests a proliferation of a delirious code that both reveals and hides.

Throughout, Moss Angel imagines poetry (or art) as a kind of violence: “I’m always having to tear apart language to do any actual communicating & sometime I wonder if that might not be the entirety of what I’m trying to do. Just absolutely tear everything apart. Starting with language. It couldn’t hurt” (5). It couldn’t hurt if it was purely a symbolic violence, but in the book, the violence blends the symbolic and the physical—and it does hurt. Or as “Lady Lazarus” so famously quips: “I do it so that it feels like hell. / I do it so it feels real.”³⁰ If I. A. Richards saw poetry as the antidote to the violence of mass culture, Moss Angel finds poetry in violence—a violence that counteracts a normative violence exerted on bodies in our culture.

Moss Angel’s monstrosity is moving and politically charged. The book is dedicated “to all the monsters” (vii). This dedication is followed by a second dedication: “Fuck the police.” On one side, there are the monsters and the witches and on the other side, the police and the “Seventy-Eight Men Who Cause Pain,” or powerbrokers, politicians, and other patriarchal figures. The book includes as an epigraph a quote from transgender activist Susan Stryker’s “My Words to Victor Frankenstein Above the Village of Chamounix: Performing Transgender Rage” to foreground the political element of this monstrosity (3). The anti-authoritarian politics of the monstrousness remind me of another book that features doctored photographs of the author: Chilean poet

³⁰ Sylvia Plath, “Lady Lazarus,” 245.

Raúl Zurita's *Purgatorio*, itself a kind of transgender book in that Zurita assumes the persona of various women—mostly prostitutes—in protest against the surveillance practices of Pinochet's fascist state. Zurita also famously burned his own cheek to mark the beginning of this, his first book. In an interview with *Prairie Schooner*, Zurita explains:

All that I came to do in those years, like the art actions with the CADA [Colectivo de Acciones de Arte], was because I felt that pain and death should be responded to with a poetry and an art that was as vast and strong as the violence that was exercised over us. To place in opposition the limitless violence of crime and the limitless violence of beauty, the extreme violence of power and the extreme violence of art, the violence of terror and the even stronger violence of all our poems. I never knew how to throw stones, but that was not our intifada. You can't defeat a dictatorship with poetry, but without poetry, and this is no metaphor, humanity disappears, literally, in the next five minutes.³¹

Perhaps we can see something similar in Moss Angel's "stabbing" ink into the gay body: a violence to counteract the heteronormative violence that pervades—and defines—our culture.

If I. A. Richards feared that the "excess" of mass culture with its movies and photography threatened the ability of people to "communicate" with each other, to transmit each other's interiority through moderate, restrained language, this witch-poet has long since jettisoned that interiority in favor of a politically charged "orgy of verbomania." If Richards saw this excess as a kind of violence against decorum and interiority, Moss Angel might define the very decorum the New Critics tried to define as a violence in its disciplining of bodies. But more importantly, in an age in which trans bodies are constantly under threat, the stabbing creates an alternative violence: a violence that stabs gay art onto the body.

5.

The US literary establishment has tended to see in poetry a quiet, controlled alternative to a violent, excessive mass culture.³² As Andreas

³¹ Nathalie Handal, "Paradise in Zurita: An Interview with Raúl Zurita," trans. David Shook, *Prairie Schooner*, <http://prairieschooner.unl.edu/excerpt/paradise-zurita-interview-ra%C3%BAI-zurita>.

³² See John Durham Peters, *Speaking into the Air: A History of the Idea of Communication* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999).

Huyssen has pointed out, Modernism tended to see in mass culture a feminine other to its own masculine and rigorous authenticity.³³ As several critics have pointed out, Plath's poetry engages with film in a variety of ways, which has resulted in the frequent charge of "sensationalism." In *Sylvia Plath and the Theatre of Mourning*, Christina Britzolakis describes this tendency of Plath's this way: "[T]hese 'weird' scenarios recycle key motifs of Gothic popular culture, drawing on cinematic as well as literary texts, to probe the nightmarish underside of the Cold War suburban dream of normalty."³⁴ Britzolakis argues that Plath's rhetoric "encodes a spectacular relation between poet and audience, foregrounding questions of sexuality and power in ways which have only recently begun to be acknowledged," and that the poems concern "a culture of consumption in which images of women circulate as commodities."³⁵ Britzolakis also shows how Plath's poetry includes a rewrite of Hitchcock's *Shadow of a Doubt* and allusions to films like Alain Resnais's *Hiroshima, Mon Amour*.³⁶

My final case study of a poet engaged with the aesthetic terrain of "bad Plath" is Sara Tuss Efrik, a young Swedish writer whose grotesque novel, *Mumieland*, received both acclaim and disdain when it was published in 2012.³⁷ But here I am more interested in two recent chapbooks in translation by US poet Paul Cunningham—*Automanias* and *The Night's Belly*—as well as her many experimental films. Efrik's work invokes Plath's repeatedly, not the least through her interest in what Britzolakis describes in Plath's poetry as the "spectacular relation between poet and audience" and how this relationship calls attention to "questions of sexuality and power."³⁸ However, I would argue that unlike Britzolakis's reading of Plath, these writings and

33 Andreas Huyssen, "Mass Culture as Woman: Modernism's Other," in *After the Great Divide: Modernism, Mass Culture, Postmodernism* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1987). Quoted in Christina Britzolakis, *Sylvia Plath and the Theatre of Mourning* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2000), 139.

34 Christina Britzolakis, *Sylvia Plath and the Theatre of Mourning* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2000), 143.

35 *Ibid.*, 135.

36 *Ibid.*, 144.

37 Sara Tuss Efrik, *Mumieland* (Stockholm: Rosenlarv Förlag, 2012).

38 Britzolakis, 135.

films do not necessarily critique the male gaze. I would argue that her work does not distance, but on the contrary intensifies these spectacles of gender, acting more like the destabilizing power that Steven Shaviro ascribes to films, for example Kathryn Bigelow's *Blue Steel*: "*Blue Steel* disrupts the gender codings and power relations implicit in more conventional action films not by distancing us from but by intensifying such films' disreputable pleasures."³⁹ Like the Surrealists and Plath, Efrik has an interest in low culture and the sexual power dynamics as staged on screen.

By naming her poems "automaniacs," Efrik is directly invoking the Surrealist practice of "automatic writing." By merging that phrase with "mania," she emphasizes the out-of-control mode of automatic writing, the very thing that led to the critical rejection of confessionalism in general, and especially Plath: the sense that it was feminine writing, writing that was not in control, not restrained, not tasteful. These poems may at first seem the opposite of confessionalism: they are montages or "writing-through" other works of art (by artists such as Aase Berg and Lars von Trier), reimagining other texts—often films—as poems. Like a long line of US experimentalism "writing-through" projects (consider John Cage's *Writing through Finnegans Wake*⁴⁰), this way of writing deemphasizes the originality of her poem—and the sense that the poem springs up from an interiority. But in difference to the US tradition of such writing, where authors tend to emphasize the anti-expressive function, Efrik's poetry is "intensifying": her work is at least as affective and vivid as the movies she invokes.

Perhaps more importantly, these automaniacs are not as different from the confessional poem as they may first seem (and as is the case in US experimentalism): the "confessions" seep through. Throughout the "automaniacs," Efrik focuses on movements of corruption, doubling, infection, tumors, and contagion. These movements of boundary-corruption reflect a corruption of the boundary between "author" and "not-author"—or original and double, poem and counterfeit, expression and automania. In "von Trier's Bitches," Efrik's re-enactment of

39 Steven Shaviro, *The Cinematic Body* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), 8.

40 John Cage, *Writing through Finnegans Wake* (Tulsa, OK: University of Tulsa Press, 1978).

Lars von Trier's *Antichrist* begins with "a step the step that trips her over into darkness." The result is a loss of self: "you can't turn back into yourself now." This is followed by what seems to be a version of the movie, but a version that focuses on the woman's experience—as witch, as object of male violence—rather than the man's: "She pulls off her floral dress goes without underwear." However, the result of this staging of the movie is strangely a return to the self: "*This contamination brings me back to myself* Head in moss Limbs in knots fuses itself leave me here..." Does this italicization suggest that the line is spoken—perhaps by someone else—or that it is interior to the author? Inside and outside has become so thoroughly volatilized that it is impossible to tell. The poem ends with a "diary entry" that may be the main character's or the author's:

Diary entry:
need a drink right now
about time to break up
how should i sleep

The strange thing about this ending is that it feels both strangely like a "return to the true self" after the movie is over and a mediated, foreign voice channeled into the film, a confession but a confession that seems to be more foreign to the text than the film being "automatized."

This tug between self and other, foreign and interior, original and copy, purity and corruption is dramatized with even more Plath-ian visceral, sensationalistic flare in *The Night's Belly*. This is a longer piece about a pregnant woman who has been abandoned in an insular apartment in Sweden while her unfaithful husband is travelling around Africa, having sex with mistresses: "I sit locked up in the apartment on Simirishamns Street for eternity. I am poisoned. The yellowed walls collapse, eggshell lacerations all over my throat" (4). This is Efrik at her most gothic and most Plath-esque: as in many of Plath's most gothic poems—or as in many tales by Edgar Allan Poe, or Charlotte Perkins Gilman's canonical *The Yellow Wallpaper*—the senses overpower the narrator. As in a lot of Cruz's poems, the senses are too strong: "There is an odor that surrounds me, metallic, it comes from my genitals" (18); "[f]locks of shrieking birds fly over our heads" (19).

In this zone of contagion, the bodies become ultra-grotesquerie of the body—the narrator's body but also her son's, her husband's, even her own mother's bodies. There's a strong element of automa-

nia about this piece: it reads as a radically expanded and exploded version of "Fever 103°." As in that poem, the pregnancy sickness of Efrik's speaker becomes highly volatile zone. The speaker's own body mutates. Suddenly she has male genitals: "My cock is pink and very similar to a dog's" (19). Her mother has "constipation," a condition that leads her to imagine that her mother's "interior is a cabinet of dark dolls. They all look the same to me. Dolls I've carved out of her shit. I've carved myself into her interior. She retains those little shit dolls. I carve her shit into a vaginal shape. I make a mother saga" (19).

The overstimulation leads to infection and proliferation: droves of detectives show up in her house (though their multiplicity seems to do more to hide any crime from being discovered than to solve whatever the crime may be), and the husband's mistresses crowd around her: "Sluts fill the delivery room" (7). In this feverish state, she comes to think that she's merely "the creature's surrogate mother" (6). As Kristeva notes about the abject: it both repulses and fascinates. She both wants to bring things into her body and expel them: "I vomit into my own face" (13). She tries to rid herself of the pregnancy, her body, but she's in a zone where the abject returns directly back to her.

The mistresses seem to bring back the witches from the automania on von Trier's *Antichrist*. At one moment, Efrik notes: "I am a collector, a thief, a hoarder. Night and day" (5). Like Joseph Cornell or some other surrealist artist, she collects—even hoards—trash as an art practice. It's not only an automania, but also an anti-mania, as she constantly rebukes herself to "avoid seeing *The Shining*" (18), as if to say: avoid entering *The Shining*, avoid being possessed by *The Shining*, avoid writing an automania of *The Shining*. The reason for this is fairly obvious: in that film the nuclear family is destroyed by the violent father. However, she fails to heed her own warning: "Jack Nicholson's mind is possessed. Like my body, my dress" (20). Soon she notes that a "surge of discomfort" is "taking possession of" her body (21). And as in bad Plath poems such as "Fever 103°," "Everything appears saturated," her baby being replaced by the image of "glossy mollusks crawling in her inland sea" as "night thickens, dreams accumulate in the throat" (21).

The way out of this fever, as in Plath's poem (or Cruz's "Masquerade"), is tied to art and violence, or art *as* violence. Turning the confessional "I" into third person, the speaker imagines that "[s]he

has ripped up all the red mistresses as well as her unborn child” and that she “kills everything that lives” (22). As in the classic gothic trope, she looks in the mirror and her own face is foreign to her: “My face is inflated and exaggerated. I am a witch, a synthetic female. I am a woman in disguise” (22). Moreover, as in Britzolakis’s take on “Lady Lazarus,” Efrick’s poem brings to mind Walter Benjamin’s argument ascribing to the prostitute the “sex appeal of the inorganic.”⁴¹ She is both living and dead, both human and artifice. When she tries to escape by “lock[ing] us up in a cabin deep in the woods”—as if to isolate herself and child—she ends up back in von Trier’s *Antichrist*, with its witches and gendered violence: “in the cottage, the red mistresses accumulate, all dressed in long red robes. They join hands, a tight circle around our beautiful disease” (23). Or perhaps it’s *Rosemary’s Baby*? Both the personas and source texts proliferate, infect, double. Abjecting this miasmic grotesquerie becomes impossible. Instead of the “healing” of the epiphany that depends on the author’s authentic experience and a coming back together of the author’s voice, there can be no epiphany in automanias, but rather a proliferation, a contagion.

We might say that Efrick is playing around with a kind of reverse use of persona, not the properly depersonalizing use that the New Critics espoused, but a ruined, infected persona that both blocks the communication of the personal and makes the personal too personal. Efrick picks up on this also in her video works, for example “Persona Peepshow,” where she restages/automania-fies Ingmar Bergman’s classic *Persona* by using the script but contorting it with a variety of masks and psychedelic choreography, making a B-movie of Bergman’s masterpiece.⁴² Or in “I Love Mummy”: a movie which features close-ups of a lightly clad Efrick messing around with a collection of masks and trinketry, and which samples the confessional lyric from Swedish installment of “The Real Housewives of Hollywood”—“My forest is made of plastic and glitter. There is no space for mothers there.”⁴³ Efrick herself is the sole star of all these movies, and she often

⁴¹ Britzolakis, 153.

⁴² Sara Tuss Efrick, “Persona Peepshow,” <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=G5LijIqntGE&t=248s>.

⁴³ Sara Tuss Efrick, “I Love Mummy,” https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=t_nso3jbYzc&t=1s.

appears partly naked: it is as if the film is meant to invoke the “male gaze.” But the gaze is disarmed by the masks, the strange effects: the trashiness of the production. It appears that desire has to be propped up by good taste. These films feel physically discomforting, in part because they are “weird,” in the way Mark Fisher describes “the weird”: “the weird is constituted by a presence—the presence of *that which does not belong*.”⁴⁴ In Efrik’s films, she appears fundamentally “weird.” And this weirdness troubles our gaze: we cannot view her pornographically, even if the nudity on the screen signals that that’s the way we should view her. The result is upsetting because “a weird entity or object is so strange that it makes us feel that it should not exist, or at least it should not exist here. Yet if the entity or object *is* here, then the categories which we have up until now used to make sense of the world cannot be valid. The weird thing is not wrong, after all: it is our conceptions that must be inadequate.”⁴⁵

*

Throughout this review, I have tried to avoid the word “influence,” because this invokes a patrilinear model of the movement of art. The conservative model of “influence”—as for example in Harold Bloom’s famous books—tend to move from one great, unique poet to the next great, unique poet. The great poet is the one able to digest the greatness of the predecessors in order to create unique, original poetry. Plath fans tend to be viewed as the opposite of this typically masculinist model: they are the nameless hoards of teenage girls who lack taste and the strength it takes to develop originality. They are mimetic, they are infections, they are monstrous and unnatural. There’s a radical model of influence and collectivity in this illegitimate, contagion-charged swarm of Plath-engaged poets. According to this model, we might catch Plath, or channel Plath, failing to comply with the kind of distancing necessary in traditional models of influence. Not only might we read in these masses of contemporary poets the influence in Plath, but we can also reread Plath through these poets. The “bad Plath” that our establishment critics have tried to clean away for so long, these writers are asking us to read back in.

⁴⁴ Mark Fisher, *The Weird and the Eerie* (London: Repeater Books, 2017), 61.
⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 15.