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In Sorrow Thou Shalt Bring Forth Children – On Childbirth in Literature

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The article investigates the history of literary childbirths, with special emphasis on the mother's presentation. Examples from English and American writers since the 17th century are considered in the light of the attitudes towards and customs of childbirth in their respective periods. Particular attention is devoted to recent women's literature, where the subject of childbirth has received prominent and original treatment. Modern women writers openly explore the physical and psychological sides of an experience distinctive of their sex; they also employ childbirth as a metaphor for societal conditions or ways of (female) existence, and have developed their own view of the conventional comparison of birth and artistic creation.

Introduction

"... they come into the world more like parcels than human beings. When a baby arrives in a novel it usually has the air of having been posted. It is delivered 'off'."[1] When E. M. Foster delivered this observation in *Aspects of the Novel* (1927), a number of explicit birth scenes had already appeared in the English novel, from Moore's *Esther Waters* to Joyce's *Ulysses*. But before the onset of Naturalism, there is indeed only one major work that describes in some detail the physical *act* of the birth of a human being:

> He averred, that upon first thrusting in for him, a leg was presented; but well knowing that that was not as it ought to be and might occasion great trouble; – he had thrust back the leg, and by a dexterous heave and toss, had wrought a somerset upon the Indian; so that with the next trial, he came forth in the good old way – head foremost.[2]

The novel is *Moby-Dick* (1851), and the 'baby' so skilfully delivered here is an Indian harpooner who has fallen into a sperm whale's head. A real birth could not have been described with such accuracy in Melville's day. Despite

the discretion which surrounded the *process* of giving birth in former centuries, literature has always reflected historical changes and cultural differences in childbirth. Like paintings and illustrations,[3] novels have thus served as sources for historical and anthropological investigations of birth customs.[4] The works of Defoe, Richardson and Sterne, for example, reflect the change from traditional, female-controlled birth practices to the management of childbirth by the man-midwife and male physician.[5] Since the turn of our century, with its general relaxation of taboos, the process of childbirth has been treated with increasing openness in bestsellers and classics like Compton Mackenzie's *Carnival* (1912), Hemingway's *A Farewell to Arms* (1929), Pearl S. Buck's *The Good Earth* (1931), Margaret Mitchell's *Gone with the Wind* (1936) or Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939), and medical documentarism is nowadays a stock ingredient in literary birth scenes.

Of the two beings who are physically and thus most immediately involved in childbirth, only the mother can verbalize her experience; attempts to capture the child's sensations, as in William Carlos Williams' *The White Mule* or Günther Grass' *The Tin Drum*, are necessarily speculative. The father, of course, is capable of expressing his perceptions of the birth of his child, and an impressive number of works give his view of the event.[6] But it is for the woman that childbearing and childbirth are of sharper significance:

> Women's lives are arranged in sharp, discontinuous steps, with the emphasis almost inevitably on being – a virgin, a girl who has ceased to be a virgin, a childless woman, a woman who has borne a child, a woman (past the menopause) who can no longer bear a child.[7]

The following discussion will therefore focus on literary representations of the *mother* in childbirth. Examples from writers of several centuries will be considered, but for obvious reasons pregnancy and childbirth – like other experiences exclusive to the female body – are of central significance in recent women's literature.

On Women's Experience of Childbirth in Pre-19th Century Literature

Until the nineteenth century, literature told far more about the external, medical or cultural circumstances of birth than about the mother's actual *experience* of the act. As far as literary representations are concerned, this experience must have been entirely one of pain and fear; in none of the

examples investigated is there any mention of a mother's positive attitude towards the event.

What is known about childbirth in the Middle Ages mostly concerns women in the upper strata of society. To them the birth of their children was always a dangerous ordeal for which the assistance of celestial powers was wanted.[8] Tristram in the medieval epic is named after the "triste" circumstances of his birth: his mother's sufferings, her death and the post-mortem caesarean by which the child is saved. The choice of the same name for Walter Shandy's son, a few centuries later, is perhaps due as much to Sterne's knowledge of the medieval story as to the slip of the Shandy maid in conveying the name "Trismegistus" to the curate about to christen the child (*Tristram Shandy*, Book IV, ch. XIV). Even if Mrs. Shandy in Sterne's novel was more fortunate in her confinement than her medieval predecessor, childbirth remained perilous and painful. In the seventeenth century, women confessed in their diaries and journals how much they dreaded the birth of their children, and some of them even gave explicit accounts of the lying-in itself:

> But loe! ... the child staied in the birth, and came crosse with his feet first ... at which time I was upon the racke in bearing my child with such exquisitt torment, as if each limbe weare divided from other, for the space of two hours ...[9]

The literature of the time is much less explicit about the lot of women in childbirth. Anne Bradstreet's poem "Before the Birth of One of Her Children" (published posthumously in 1678) is one of the few literary treatments of the subject. The poem, addressed to the speaker's husband, is typical of its period in expressing the mother's dread of the occasion and her apprehensions of death:

> How soon, my Dear, death may my steps attend,
> How soon't may be thy Lot to lose thy friend,
> We are both ignorant, yet love bids me
> These farewell lines to recommend to thee.[10]

However, Bradstreet, the mother of eight children, confines herself to dealing only with the woman's antenatal experience. To write about birth itself, not to speak of the explicit details of some of the journals, would have been out of the question for a woman who wanted to see her writing published in the seventeenth century. To female writers confronted with male prejudice and

restricted by ideals of female modesty,[11] the subject of childbirth obviously did not suggest itself.

In the 18th century, the mother's dread is more frequently alluded to in literature, and even a sober and healthy woman like Defoe's Roxana is gripped by fear and makes her will. The sentimental novel, of course, exploits the emotional potential of a mother's premonitions of death. Pamela, in Richardson's novel, is "exceedingly apprehensive" during her pregnancy and composes a touching farewell to her husband. The birth *act*, however, is still taboo in the novels of both male and female writers. Even "Monk" Lewis, otherwise not too squeamish to describe the vilest details, leaves the unspeakable terrors of a young woman's solitary confinement entirely to the reader's imagination: "With pangs which if witnessed would have touched the hardest heart, was I delivered of my wretched burden."[12] But the mere fact that the event was here awarded a place in the horror chamber of the gothic novel indicates what the general attitude towards birth at the time must have been.

With all this reticence about the act of birth in 18th-century novels, one element nevertheless emerges as fairly evident – children are born primarily for the gratification of their *fathers*:

> I lived six years in this happy but unhappy condition, in which time I brought him three children, but only the first of them lived ... (Defoe, *Moll Flanders*, 1722)[13]

> I don't think a lady can be requited with a *less* worthy [husband], for all she is likely to suffer on a husband's account and for the sake of *his* family and name. (Richardson, *Pamela*, part II, 1741)[14]

> Sophia hath already produced him two fine children, a boy and a girl ... (Fielding, *Tom Jones*, 1749)[15]

This view is not restricted to male authors; the same phrases regularly appear in women's novels of the time:

> The same Year *Violetta* bless'd her Lord with a Son, and *Ardelisa* hers with a Daughter ... (Penelope Aubin, *The Strange Adventures of the Count de Vinevil*, 1721)[16]

> *Amanda* lived to bear the Duke a Son ... (Elizabeth Boyd, *The Happy-Unfortunate or The Female Page*, 1732)[17]

> Orlando was very soon after made completely happy by the birth of a son, to whom he gave his own name, and who seemed to render his charming mother yet more dear to all around her. (Charlotte Smith, *The Old Manor House*, 1793)[18]

The main purpose of childbirth, it appears, was to deliver to the husband a healthy child, preferably male, and the mother's prime reward was her husband's satisfaction. For many women, the act of childbirth thus must have been the mere conclusion of a painful marriage duty. It is perhaps this view of childbirth as an unquestioned part of the marriage bargain – apart from considerations of modesty – that accounts for the literary silence about birth in this period.

On the Experience of Childbirth in 19th Century Literature

As is to be expected of a period known for its prudery, the 19th century is even more discreet about the physical side of birth. Victorian women – of the upper classes – were generally so ashamed of their pregnant bodies that they kept to their homes until the baby was born. This hiding of childbearing and childbirth from public attention is reflected in art and literature: the birth chamber is still depicted in paintings and illustrations until the end of the 18th century, but then birth scenes disappear from art history until the 1890's.[19] The literature of the time is likewise notorious for its evasiveness about the subject; in *Orlando*, Virginia Woolf mocks this conventionalized non-description of the birth act:

> Is nothing, then, going to happen this pale March morning to mitigate, to veil, to cover, to conceal, to shroud this undeniable event whatever it may be? For after giving that sudden, violent start, Orlando – but Heaven be praised, at this very moment there struck up outside one of these frail, reedy, fluty, jerky, old-fashioned barrel-organs which are still sometimes played by Italian organ-grinders in back streets. Let us accept the intervention ...[20]

At the same time, however, one may speak of a new cult of maternal suffering and death in both fiction and poetry.[21] While 18th-century mothers promise "to make as few Cries as possible,"[22] "cries of agony"[23] pierce the Victorian father's ears while he waits for his child to be born. Despite the availability of anaesthetics from the second half of the century, pregnancy and birth were still an ordeal,[24] but since the risks of childbirth had not increased, this accentuation of suffering must be the result of new cultural codes. The general tendency to pathologize female biology and the ideal of female frailty might actually have caused a lowering of the female pain threshold. Exaggerated prudery about all of the natural physical functions certainly intensified the feeling of repulsion which most women felt towards pregnancy and childbirth,

not least because these conditions were the direct consequence of an act of sexual union that was rejected in the first place. A strong sense of physical degradation seems to have been the dominant impression Queen Victoria derived from her many confinements: "I think much more of our being like a cow or a dog at such moments; when our poor nature becomes so very animal and unecstatic."[25] In addition, the emphasis on religious and moral considerations almost *obliged* the woman to suffer in childbirth. Birthpain was decreed by God in Genesis and was therefore considered "an inevitable prelude to the joys of maternity."[26] Such convictions led to an idealized, even sanctified image of the parturient woman which corresponded to the general glorification of the mother as a madonna or "angel in the house." For the woman in childbirth, the new cultural model became the *mater dolorosa* – the pale and worn madonna who fulfils her painful duty in patient endurance. This image stands in stark contrast to the animalistic experience so keenly felt for example by the Queen, but it was rooted in women's consciousness, not least by the help of literature.

In her sonnet "Motherhood" (1889), for instance, the poet Mathilde Blind draws a parallel between a new mother and the mother of Christ:

> To moans of anguish terrible and wild –
> As shrieks the night-wind through an ill-shut pane –
> Pure heaven succeeds; and after fiery strain
> Victorious woman smiles serenely mild. ...
> The soul now kindled by her vital flame
> May it not prove a gift of priceless worth?
> Some saviour of his kind whose starry fame
> Shall bring a brightness to the darkened earth.[27]

Through her violent birth pains, the woman in the poem has been cleansed and elevated. Expressions like "anguish terrible and wild" or the allusion to the shrieks of the night-wind suggest that she has experienced a kind of exorcism. Only after her wickedness has been cast out, is she capable of becoming a mother-madonna (unmistakably identified by the mild and serene smile), worthy of protecting a child. David Copperfield's mother is similarly glorified after the birth of her second child, an ordeal which she does not survive. She dies with the iconic smile on her lips: "...such a patient smile, the dear! – so beautiful!"[28] The idea that the torment of childbirth redeems the original sin of Eve also underlies the birth scene in Elizabeth Gaskell's *Ruth* (1853):

> The earth was still 'hiding her guilty front with innocent snow,' when a little baby was laid by the side of the pale, white mother. It was a boy ... here was a new, pure, beautiful, innocent life, which she fondly imagined, in that early passion of maternal love, she could guard from every touch of corrupting sin by ever watchful and most tender care.[29]

Quite obviously, like the woman in Blind's poem, the "pale white mother" has been purified in her ordeal. In Ellen Wood's *East Lynn* (1861), the contrast between sinful Eve and the pure madonna is even more explicit. When her sister-in-law hears about Lady Isabel's agony, she refers to it as "our common curse." After the birth, Isabel appears as another emblematic *mater dolorosa*, who moves her husband to tears: "His eyelashes glistened as he looked down at her. She detected his emotion, and a faint smile parted her lips."[30] Even for the prostitute in Bret Harte's story "The Luck of Roaring Camp" (1868) the gates of heaven stand open after the "martyrdom" of the "primal curse": "Within an hour she had climbed, as it were, that rugged road that led to the stars, and so passed out of Roaring Camp, its sin and shame, forever."[31]

However, after the second half of the 19th century, an increasing number of women no longer accepted suffering in childbirth as god-given and natural. The actress Fanny Kemble, for example, had her doubts about the justice of Eve's curse: "I cannot believe that all the agony and debility attendant upon the entrance of a new creature into life was ordained."[32] Constance in Arnold Bennett's *The Old Wives' Tale* (1908) is a literary example of a woman who no longer identifies with the idealized role she is expected to assume in pregnancy and childbirth:

> Usually she could play the comedy of sensible calmness to almost perfection. Then the appointed time drew nigh. And still she smiled ... And then the first pains, sharp, shocking, cruel, heralds of torture! But when they had withdrawn, she smiled, again, palely ... And the doctor came into the room. She smiled at the doctor apologetically ...[33]

The conventional smile of patient endurance is here felt to be a mask behind which the woman is forced to hide her real sensations, these sensations being what Queen Victoria referred to as the "animal" side of giving birth: "No self-respect now! Why, not even a woman now! Nothing but a kind of animalized victim!"[34] In Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* (1899), Edna Pontellier watches a friend give birth. A traditional and devoted "mother-woman" and "faultless Madonna," Mme Ratignolle is delivered without the relief of chloroform, and her agonized pain deeply upsets Edna: "With an inward

agony, with a flaming, outspoken revolt against the ways of Nature, she witnessed the scene of torture."[35] Like Constance in *The Old Wives' Tale*, Edna has become aware of the "animalization" of the woman in childbearing and childbirth, her reduction to a mere biological function. It is this presentation of childbirth as an animalistic experience that marks the birth scenes in the novels of Bennett and Chopin as points of transition between the 19th and the 20th centuries.

The Presentation of Childbirth in the 20th Century

In literary birth scenes of our century, animal comparisons have replaced the *mater dolorosa* as a central image in the presentation of the parturient woman. In Morton Thompsons *The Cry and the Covenant* (1949), a woman howls "like a wild animal";[36] Leah in Joyce Carol Oates' *Bellefleur* (1980) becomes "a trashing screaming animal whose cries rang out, through the opened windows, to permeate the darkness."[37] Often it is doctors who observe the animalistic or vegetative side of female reproduction. In Jessamyn West's *South of the Angels* (1960), for example, a member of the medical profession appreciates the ease with which a woman has just given birth: "His wife had babies like a cat has kittens,"[38] a compliment that is repeated in Penelope Mortimer's *The Pumpkin Eater* (1962): "She drops those babies like a cat, you know – it's a pleasure to watch ...."[39] In William Carlos Williams' "A Night in June" (1938), too, the doctor takes delight in the naturalness of the process: "I see her to be as clean as a cow that calves."[40]

From the woman's point of view, animal and vegetable comparisons almost always have negative connotations. Simone de Beauvoir, in *The Second Sex*, polemically described the pregnant woman as "plant and animal, a storehouse of colloids, an incubator, an egg; ... she is a human being ... who has become life's passive instrument."[41] What the women in most women's poetry and fiction experience as 'animal' is the same, very personal sense of being reduced to an alienated, primitive being:

> I am pushing until my eyes open and I see the doctor holding a long instrument which he swiftly thrusts into me and the pain makes me cry out. A long animal howl. (Anaïs Nin, "Birth," 1938)[42]

> There was a cry then, animal, and it was mine. (Rosamond Lehmann, *The Echoing Grove*, 1953)[43]

> ...the pain was no longer defined and separate from her but total, grasping, heating, bursting the whole of her, head, chest, wrought and pounded belly, so that animal sounds broke from it, grunts, incoherent grinding clamour, panting sighs. (A. S. Byatt, *Still Life*, 1985)[44]

In Sylvia Plath's poem "Metaphors" (1959), the experience of pregnancy is conveyed in a chain of images: "I'm a riddle in nine syllables,/An elephant, a ponderous house .../I'm a means, a stage, a cow in calf."[45] As in the examples above, animal and plant imagery here expresses the woman's bodily sensations, an experience of alienation, deformation and clumsiness. But there is also a sense of being usurped by the child; the woman's body is no longer her personal possession; it has become the child's "ponderous house." Like the animal image, imagery of utilization is almost a conventional element in women's literary treatments of pregnancy and birth, e.g.:

> I am an instrument, something to be made use of ... (Jean Rhys, *Good Morning, Midnight*, 1939)[46]

> What do you think I am: a container, a jar where you put some object for safekeeping? I'm a woman, for God's sake, I'm a person ... (Oriana Fallaci, *Letter to a Child Never Born*, 1975)[47]

Metaphors of food and eating convey an even stronger sense of the mother's exploitation; for example in Doris Betts' short story "Still Life with Fruit" (1970), where the mother feels driven out of her own body: "The baby ate her. Now the baby's container was huge but Gwen, invisible, had no body to live in."[48] In Joyce Carol Oates' "Foetal Song" (1969), the consummation of the mother is rendered from the child's perspective. The poem is a classic example of "female gothic," with the mother as victim and the child as villain:

> The vehicle gives a lurch but seems
> to know its destination.
> ...
> Now we are in bed.
> Her heart breathes quiet and I drink blood.
> ...
> While he speaks to her I suck marrow from her bones.[49]

The foetus in this poem is an egoistic, self-loving and malicious creature, a vampire who relishes his mother's blood and marrow and is aware of his power to hurt his "vehicle."

What most obviously distinguishes these modern examples from earlier ones is their emphasis on the *physical* side of pregnancy and childbirth. It

is equally significant that almost all of these examples were written by women:

> Today, for the first time, a woman novelist has the social freedom to exploit her fundamental advantage of having had first-hand experience of childbirth by writing, without evasion, of what happens to a woman's body and to her mind when her child is being born.[50]

As we have seen, it is also a fairly recent phenomenon that women regard childbirth as an act which is *worth* experiencing, analysing or even making into a work of art. Such a positive attitude towards birth coincides with women's growing awareness of their bodily existence and their wish to consciously experience their bodies.

The new attitude towards childbirth first appears in literature in the late twenties and thirties. Edith Wharton's *Twilight Sleep* (1954) derives its title from an obstetrical innovation which, thanks to an amnesiac drug, entirely removed the woman's memory of the birth process. Wharton *ironically* portrays a society woman's wish for a delivery in which all birth experience is avoided: "Mrs. Manford ... of course knew the most perfect 'Twilight Sleep' establishment in the country ... and Lita drifted into motherhood ... lightly and imperceivingly ..."[51] In her novel *The Squire* (1938), Enid Bagnold enthusiastically propagated the ideas of Dr. Grantly Dick-Read's *Natural Childbirth* (1933). In her labour, the woman feels "rest and glory." She completely immerses herself in the functionings of her body and ecstatically conquers the pain: "If you swim, not pain but sensation!"[52] The modern woman's wish to participate in and control the act of childbirth, her expectation to derive a sense of satisfaction and self-fulfilment from the event, stands in sharp contrast to the Victorian woman's patient endurance. To women with such an attitude, even the pain is a part of the experience they wish to analyse and memorize. Martha, in Doris Lessing's *A Proper Marriage* (1954), even feels betrayed when she cannot remember the quality of her pains:

> Martha found herself in a condition of anxious but exasperated anger that she could *not* remember the agony fifteen seconds after it had ended ... When the wave of pain had receded, and she lay spent, she was grimly flogging her mind to *imagine* the quality of the pain that had just gone. Impossible.[53]

For the first time in history, childbirth today is no longer a life and death affair; the women are well prepared and approach the event with a markedly changed attitude. However, new *external* circumstances may again spoil

the modern woman's birth experience. Like male-controlled gynaecology in general, hospitalized childbirth has become a prominent target of feminist protest:

> ... areas of attack include the 'depersonalization' of ... birth, the ritual, unnecessary use of procedures such as the shaving of pubic hair and the giving of enemas in the first stage of labour; episiotomies and the use of forceps or caesarean section in the second stage; analgesia and/or anaesthesia throughout. There are protests about the use of the horizontal supine position for delivery ...[54]

The horrors of the hospital, the violation of the woman's dignity as well as her body, have emerged as a new *topos* in the birth scenes of contemporary women's literature, from Lessing's *A Proper Marriage* and Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar* (1963) to more recent works like Fay Weldon's *Down Among the Women* (1971) and *Puffball* (1980), Elizabeth Baines' *The Birth Machine* (1983) or A. S. Byatt's *Still Life*. Obstetrical progress may result in complete non-experience of birth, as is epitomized in a short description in *The Bell Jar*: strapped on a table that "looked like some awful torture table, with these metal stirrups sticking up in mid-air at one end and all sorts of instruments and wires and tubes," a woman gives birth "in a kind of twilight sleep."[55] Totally numbed by a drug that perversely does not even alleviate her pain, she gives birth mechanically, manipulated by the medical staff. Zelda in Elizabeth Baines' bitter and polemical novel is similarly reduced to a "birth machine" when she is unknowingly included in a clinical trial of a convenience induction of labour. She does not *give* birth, but the child is pulled out of her: "A sluther. Pop. He pulls it out, like a rabbit from a hat. A purple corkscrew baby."[56] In "Still Life with Fruit," where the woman has a spinal block, Doris Betts similarly uses the image of a conjuring trick to convey the non-experience of birth: "Suddenly the doctor was very busy and, like a magician, tugged out of nowhere a long and slimy blue-gray thing, one gut spilling from its tail."[57]

Women's literature today thus records the current state of obstetrical art and women's reaction to it. But the act of giving birth is frequently more than the object of realistic description or feminist protest. As an archetypal female experience, it may acquire a metaphoric quality, in particular when different modes of giving birth are juxtaposed.

Birth as Metaphor in Women's Literature

A return from technological, 'male' obstetrics to natural birth practices or the traditional system of female-assisted childbirth is an important feminist

demand.[58] Margaret Atwood contrasts these two modes of giving birth in *Surfacing* (1972). The narrator in this novel leads an unrelated life in an urban, technological society; she has repressed the fact that she aborted her first child. The return to the natural environment of her childhood enables her to overcome her crisis. During a shamanistic trance at the end of the book, she envisions the birth of the new baby conceived in nature which will redeem her abortion and which already serves as a symbol of the new life she wants to lead in the future. In contrast to the hospital abortion which symbolizes the sterility of her former existence, the new child will be born naturally and in a matriarchal rite:

> This time I will do it by myself, squatting, on old newspapers in a corner alone; or on leaves, dry leaves a heap of them, that's cleaner. The baby will slip out easily as an egg, a kitten, and I'll lick it off and bite the cord, the blood returning to the ground where it belongs; the moon will be full, pulling.[59]

The same opposition of birth modes with the same metaphorical connotations is used in Zoe Fairbairns' *Benefits* (1979), a feminist dystopia about a near future in which all the achievements of women's liberation have been undone. Women who are officially allowed to bear children give birth in institutions that resemble baby factories: "Wires from machines sent her body into spasms at intervals. She tried to count them but her head kept going woozy."[60] Male-controlled, technological childbirth epitomizes women's situation in a totalitarian and patriarchal society. The horrifying legal confinement is contrasted with the gentle, female-assisted birth of an unauthorized baby. Jane, who has opposed the laws of society, must deliver at home and thus enjoys a conscious birth, in which she is patiently and sympathetically assisted by her mother, a member of the underground feminist movement. Natural birth here stands for the rebellious and human element in an unhuman society:

> Just as it seemed impossible, just as it seemed that a ragged tear would reward Lynn's reluctance to cut, the head was born with a little gush of blood and fluid and after that it was easy – a couple more pushes and the baby fell plop like a fish into Lynn's hands.
>
> With the cord still pulsating they laid the baby on Jane's flat soft stomach.[61]

Like *Benefits*, Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* (1984) offers the view of a future misogynous society. In the Republic of Gilead, an Orwellian state based on the misuse of biblical law, "handmaids" are passed around the upper class households to act as childbearers for barren wives. But in

this dystopia, feminism is itself among the targets of attack. The novel criticizes tendencies in present-day feminism "towards ... a matriarchal nostalgia ... that threatens to join forces with right-wing demands for 'traditional values'."[62] Appropriate to the tale of a woman defined in terms of her childbearing capability, this criticism is most poignantly expressed in a birth scene. As in contemporary feminism, male-controlled hospital birth is rejected as a misogynous institution:

> A shame it was, said Aunt Lydia. Shameful. What she'd just showed us was a film, made in an olden-days hospital: a pregnant woman, wired up to a machine, electrodes coming out of her every which way so that she looked like a broken robot, an intravenous drip feeding into her arm.[63]

Instead, society has reverted to birth practices common until the 18th century, the old tradition of "social childbirth"[64]: childbirth in Gilead is a women's affair, an occasion for a sociable gathering of the female community. When one of the handmaids gives birth, on a traditional birthing stool (the return to the vertical birth position also being a feminist demand), all the other handmaids stimulate her with rhythmical singing. However, this female-controlled childbirth is by no means the ideal desired in contemporary feminism; it is not the return to older practices for the *mother's* sake. Matriarchal rites cover up what is indeed an act of female exploitation: anaesthetics are rejected not to give the mother a conscious birth experience, but because they might harm the precious baby and, in particular, to satisfy Biblical doctrine: "In sorrow thou shalt bring forth children." The handmaid, the surrogate womb, has no right to her child and thus no need for a birth experience. It is the barren woman who becomes the legal mother of the handmaid's child, in a perverse mock birth of the baby which echoes the perversity of the whole Gileadean system:

> She scrambles onto the Birthing Stool, sits on the seat behind and above Janine, so that Janine is framed by her: her skinny legs come down on either side, like the arms of an eccentric chair. Oddly enough, she's wearing white cotton socks, and bedroom slippers, blue ones made of fuzzy material, like toilet-seat covers.[65]

In Huxley's *Brave New World*, childbirth has been abolished altogether; babies are 'decanted' and women have pregnancy substitutes to satisfy the rest of maternal instinct still hidden in their subconscious. In Huxley's novel, the abolishment of childbirth serves as a metaphor for society's general lack of humanity. In the modern women's dystopias, it is the *mode* of childbirth

that is used to make a statement about society and about society's attitude towards women. To women writers today the birth experience has become an important metaphor for the way women see themselves and their position in society.

But at least in our culture, giving birth is also a conventional metaphor for artistic creation.[66] For female artists, this metaphor has always implied a dimension of actual motherhood. As several studies have shown, many women in the 19th and early 20th centuries found it difficult to reconcile creativity of the mind with physical reproduction,[67] and this is still regarded as a problem by modern artists. In "*One* Child of One's Own" (1979), Alice Walker describes her experience of having a child and its effect on her writing. However, she is conspicuously careful *not* to confuse the acts of childbirth and artistic creation:

> From a woman whose "womb" had been, in a sense, her head ... to a woman who ... had two wombs! No. To a woman who had written books, conceived in her head, and who had also engendered at least one human being in her body.[68]

Walker starts in the vein of the traditional birth metaphor but then makes a very explicit distinction between the head and the womb. To the female artist with the actual experience of physical childbirth behind her, biological and intellectual achievement do not easily merge.

Other woman writers, however, have used the metaphor in a more conventional way. In Sylvia Plath's "Stillborn" (1960),[69] it is poetry and not a child that has not come alive:

> These poems do not live: it's a sad diagnosis.
> They grew their toes and fingers well enough,
> Their little foreheads bulged with concentration.
> If they missed out on walking about like people
> It wasn't for any lack of mother-love.

Even here, however, the poet's sadness about artistic failure is distinctly tinged with the *female* experience of pregnancy and the loss of a child. The image of the dead baby is concrete in its physical detail; and the attention paid to this detail is that of a mother who has felt the foetus grow and is

anxious, after the birth, to know if her child is complete: "They are proper in shape and number and every part."

In Margaret Atwood's story "Giving Birth," the themes of childbirth and artistic creation are more intricately interwoven. On its most obvious level, the story is about a young woman, Jeannie, who is taken to hospital to give birth to her first child. But it is also and primarily a story about the woman writer whose artistic creation Jeannie is. She is created to bring the writer "closer to something that time has already made distant."[70] This "something" is the experience of giving birth that made her a mother and thus significantly changed her life and her view of life, but which language, the writer's artistic medium, only captures inadequately:

> But who gives it? And to whom is it given? ... Maybe the phrase was made by someone viewing the result only ... And *delivering*, that act the doctor is generally believed to perform: who delivers what? ... Thus language, muttering in its archaic tongues of something, yet one more thing, that needs to be renamed.[71]

When Jeannie's birth experience is described, language again proves to be inadequate: "This, finally, is the disappearance of language. *You don't remember afterwards*, she has been told by almost everyone."[72] To the writer in Atwood's story, this evasiveness of the birth experience has become an artistic challenge. Creating Jeannie, her labour and delivery, recreates for her once more her own fleeting experience of childbirth and explains to her how she became the woman she now is – despite the insufficiency of language: "It was to me, after all, that the birth was given, Jeannie gave it, I am the result."[73] "Giving Birth," then, is an elaboration of the birth/creation-metaphor that is both story and metastory; it renders the birth experience from the woman's perspective and at the same time raises the question of its expressibility in language and in art.

Conclusion

Literature reflects the history of birth customs as well as women's changing attitudes toward the event itself. Determined by these socio-historical circumstances, different literary styles of childbirth have emerged: the reticence of former centuries stands in sharp contrast to the detail of the modern birth scene; the 19th type of the *mater dolorosa* is replaced by imagery of the mother's animalization and utilization, and the horrors of

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hospital delivery are a popular *topos* in contemporary women's literature. It is in the works of modern women writers that the subject has received prominent and original treatment. These writers authentically explore the physical and psychological sides of an important experience peculiar to their sex. Beyond this concern, childbirth becomes a feminine metaphor for conditions of society and ways of female existence. But the artist who has herself borne a child also has her own way of looking at the traditional equasion of birth and creativity. Margaret Atwood's "Giving Birth" combines a realistic account of childbirth with artistic reflections on the expressibility of this experience. The story born out of this approach could only be the creation of a woman artist.

NOTES

1. E. M. Forster, *Aspects of the Novel* (Harmondsworth, 1976), p. 60.
2. Herman Melville, *Moby Dick or the Whale* (New York, 1964), p. 281.
3. For the subject of childbirth in the arts see Robert Müllerheim, *Die Wochenstube in der Kunst: Eine kulturhistorische Studie* (Stuttgart, 1904); A. M. Pachinger, *Die Mutterschaft in der Malerei und Graphik* (München/Leipzig, 1906); F. v. Zglinicki, *Geburt: Eine Kulturgeschichte in Bildern* (Braunschweig, 1983); Volker Lehmann, *Die Geburt in der Kunst: Geburtshilfliche Motive in der darstellenden Kunst in Europa von der Antike bis zur Gegenwart* (Braunschweig, 1978).
4. See Maria Curro Kreppel, "Books I've Read: Crosscurrents in Obstetrics and Literary Childbirth," *Atlantis*, 10, No. 1 (Fall 1984), 1–11; David Meltzer (ed.), *Birth: An Anthology of Ancient Texts, Songs, Prayers, and Stories* (San Francisco, 1981); literary examples are also quoted in Adrienne Rich, *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution* (1976, rpt. London, 1977) and Richard W. Wertz/Dorothy C. Wertz, *Lying-In: A History of Childbirth in America* (New York/London, 1977); for background information see Harry Graham, *Eternal Eve: The Mysteries of Birth and the Customs that Surround It* (rev. ed. London, 1960) and the more recent and comprehensive studies by Edward Shorter, *A History of Women's Bodies* (New York, 1982), part II and Ann Oakley, *The Captured Womb: A History of the Medical Care of Pregnant Women* (Oxford, 1984).
5. For a detailed discussion see Madeleine Riley's study of childbirth in the English novel, *Brought to Bed* (South Brunswick/New York, 1968), chs. 3 and 4.
6. See also Riley, ch. 7: "How Husbands Behave"; American examples range from Hemingway to John Updike.
7. Margaret Mead, *Male and Female: A Study of the Sexes in a Changing World* (1949, rpt. Harmondsworth, 1962), p. 175.
8. See Pauline Stafford, *Queens, Concubines and Dowagers: The King's Wife in the Early Middle Ages* (London, 1983), p. 89; Barbara Tuchman, *A Distant Mirror: The Calamitous 14th Century* (1978, rpt. Harmondsworth, 1979), pp. 216ff.

9. Quoted from Mary Prior, *Women in English Society 1500–1800* (London/New York, 1985), p. 196; for 18th century documents see Bridget Hill (ed.), *Eighteenth Century Women: An Anthology* (London, 1984); see also Antonia Fraser, *The Weaker Vessel: Woman's Lot in Seventeenth-Century England* (1984, rpt. London, 1985), p. 77; Wertz/Wertz, p. 21; Patricia Branca, *Women in Europe Since 1750* (London, 1978), pp. 76–80.
10. Quoted from René Graziani (ed.), *The Naked Astronaut: Poems on Birth and Birthdays* (London/Boston, 1983), p. 106.
11. See Angeline Goreau, *The Whole Duty of a Woman: Female Writers in Seventeenth-Century England* (Garden City, N.Y., 1985).
12. Matthew Gregory Lewis, *The Monk* (1796, rpt. New York, 1975), p. 321.
13. Daniel Defoe, *Moll Flanders* (London/New York, 1930), p. 102.
14. Samuel Richardson, *Pamela*, 2 vols. (London/New York, 1962), vol. II., p. 267.
15. Henry Fielding, *The History of Tom Jones* (Harmondsworth, 1966), p. 873.
16. Penelope Aubin, *The Strange Adventures of the Count de Vinevil and His Family* (New York/London, 1973), pp. 137f.
17. Elizabeth Boyd, *The Happy-Unfortunate or the Female Page* (New York/London, 1972), p. 339.
18. Charlotte Smith, *The Old Manor House* (London, 1969), p. 533.
19. See Pachinger, pp. 97, 137; Müllerheim, p. 217.
20. Virginia Woolf, *Orlando: A Biography* (1928, rpt. London, 1949), p. 261.
21. See also Riley, p. 130 and Kathleen Hickok, *Representations of Women: Nineteenth-Century British Women's Poetry* (Westport, Conn., 1984), pp. 79ff.
22. Daniel Defoe, *Roxana: The Fortunate Mistress* (Oxford, 1981), p. 79.
23. Elizabeth Gaskell, *Mary Barton: A Tale of Manchester Life* (1848, rpt. Harmondsworth, 1970), p. 55.
24. See Francoise Basch, *Relative Creatures: Victorian Women in Society and the Novel 1837–67* (London, 1974), pp. 35f.; Janet Dunbar, *The Early Victorian Woman: Some Aspects of Her Life (1837–57)* (London, 1953); pp. 23ff.; E. Hellerstein Olafson/Leslie Parker Hume/Karen M. Offen (eds.) *Victorian Women: A Documentary Account of Women's Lives in Nineteenth-Century England, France and the United States* (Brighton, 1981), pp. 207ff.
25. In a letter to her daughter, June 15, 1858; quoted from Olafson *et al.*, p. 209.
26. Dunbar, p. 24.
27. Quoted from Hickok, p. 78.
28. Charles Dickens, *David Copperfield* (1850; rpt. Harmondsworth, 1966), p. 186.
29. Elizabeth Gaskell, *Ruth*, The Works of Mrs. Gaskell, vol. III (London, 1906), pp. 159f.
30. Mrs. Henry [Ellen] Wood, *East Lynn* (London, 1907), pp. 127, 129.
31. Quoted from Bret Harte, *The Outcasts of Poker Flat, The Luck of Roaring Camp, and Other Stories* (1870, rpt. New York, 1964), pp. 21–30, here: pp. 21, 23.
32. Quoted from Dunbar, p. 24; see also Jenni Calder, *Women and Marriage in Victorian Fiction* (London, 1976), p. 162.
33. Arnold Bennett, *The Old Wives' Tale* (London, 1964), p. 190.
34. *Ibid.*
35. Kate Chopin, *The Awakening* (London, 1978), p. 182.
36. Morton Thompson, *The Cry and the Covenant* (Garden City, N.Y., 1949), p. 192.
37. Joyce Carol Oates, *Bellefleur* (New York, 1980), p. 101.

38. Jessamyn West, *South of the Angels* (New York, 1960), p. 525.
39. Penelope Mortimer, *The Pumpkin Eater* (Harmondsworth, 1964), p. 37.
40. Quoted from William Carlos Williams, *The Doctor Stories*, compiled by Robert Coles (1984, rpt. London/Boston, 1987), pp. 61–68, here: p. 67; see also his poem "The Birth," in: *The Doctor Stories*, pp. 127f.
41. Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex* (London, 1960 [trans. of *Le Deuxième Sexe*, 1949]), p. 231.
42. Quoted from Anaïs Nin, *Under a Glass Bell* (1944, rpt. Harmondsworth, 1948), pp. 102–107, here: p. 105.
43. Rosamond Lehmann, *The Echoing Grove* (Harmondsworth, 1958), p. 36.
44. A. S. Byatt, *Still Life* (Harmondsworth, 1986), p. 92.
45. Sylvia Plath, "Metaphors," written in 1959, quoted from *The Colossus* (1960, rpt. London, 1967), p. 41.
46. Jean Rhys, *Good Morning Midnight* (Harmondsworth, 1969), p. 50.
47. Oriana Fallaci, *Letter to a Child Never Born* (Feltham, Middlesex, 1982 [trans. of *Lettera a un bambino mai nato*, 1975]), p. 55.
48. Doris Betts, "Still Life with Fruit," in: Mary Anne Ferguson, *Images of Women in Literature* (2nd ed. Boston, 1977), pp. 139–153, here: p. 142.
49. Quoted from Graziani (ed.) *The Naked Astronaut*, pp. 123–125.
50. Riley, p. 72.
51. Edith Wharton, *Twilight Sleep* (New York/London, 1927), p. 14.
52. Enid Bagnold, *The Squire* (London, 1987), pp. 143, 145.
53. Doris Lessing, *A Proper Marriage* (London, 1966), p. 164.
54. Ann Oakley, "Wisewoman and Medicine Man: Changes in the Management of Childbirth," in: Juliet Mitchell/Ann Oakley (eds.), *The Rights and Wrongs of Woman* (Harmondsworth, 1976), pp. 17–58, here: p. 35; see also Rich, pp. 156ff.; Mary Daly, *Gyn/Ecology: The Metaethics of Radical Feminism* (Boston, 1978), pp. 224, 257 or Susan Griffin, *Woman and Nature: The Roaring Inside Her* (1978, rpt. London, 1984), pp. 70ff.
55. Sylvia Plath, *The Bell Jar* (London, 1966), pp. 67, 68.
56. Elizabeth Baines, *The Birth Machine* (London, 1983), p. 79.
57. Betts, "Still Life with Fruit," p. 152.
58. See Oakley, *Women Confined*, pp. 295f.; Griffin, *Woman and Nature*, pp. 197f.; Rich, p. 173.
59. Margaret Atwood, *Surfacing* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1972), p. 162.
60. Zoe Fairbairns, *Benefits* (London, 1979), p. 194.
61. *Ibid.*, pp. 193f.
62. Lorna Sage, "Projects from a Messy Present," *TLS*, March 21, 1986, p. 307.
63. Margaret Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale* (London, 1987), p. 124.
64. See Wertz/Wertz, pp. 4f.; see also Prior, pp. 196f.
65. Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale*, p. 135.
66. See also Robert A. Erickson, *Mother Midnight: Birth, Sex, and Fate in Eighteenth-Century Fiction (Defoe, Richardson, and Sterne)* (New York, 1986), p. xii.
67. See Rich, pp. 38–40, 249ff.; Ellen Moers, *Literary Women* (Garden City, N.Y., 1976), pp. 92ff.; Tillie Olsen, *Silences* (London, 1980), pp. 16, 31.
68. Alice Walker, "*One* Child of One's Own," in: *In Search of Our Mother's Garden* (New York, 1983), pp. 361–383, here: pp. 362, 369.
69. Quoted from Sylvia Plath, *Crossing the Water* (London, 1971), p. 35.

70. Quoted from Margaret Atwood, *Dancing Girls and Other Stories* (1977, rpt. Toronto, 1978), pp. 228–245; here: p. 232.
71. *Ibid.*, pp. 228f.
72. *Ibid.*, p. 241.
73. *Ibid.*, p. 244.

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