The Fluidity of Literary Genre: Sylvia Plath's and Ocean Vuong's Contribution to the Poet's Novel

Marilù Ciabattoni

Professor Allison Grimaldi Donahue

Professor Carlos Dews

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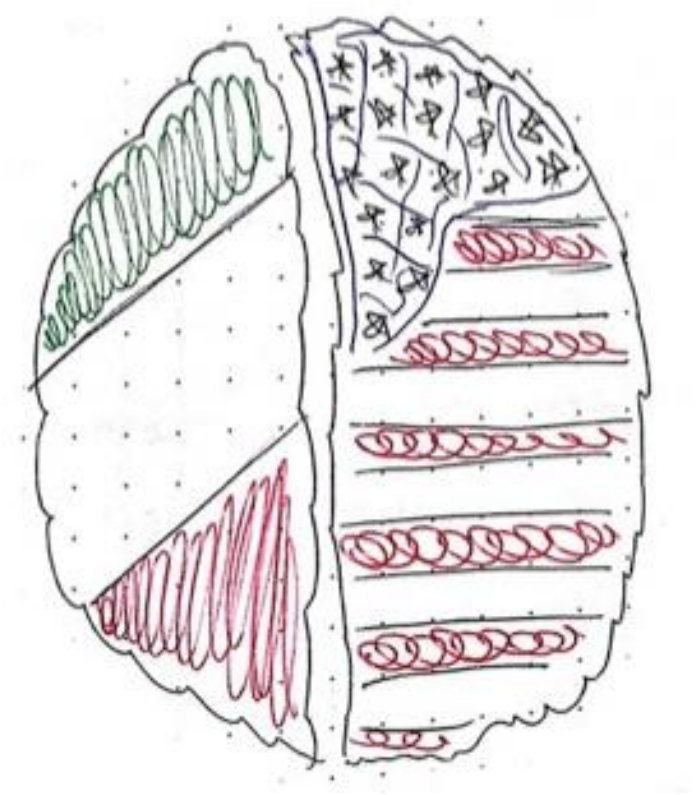

(Ciabattoni)

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Acknowledgments

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Part One

Let Me Begin Again

Why does a poet decide to write a novel? What can prose offer compared to poetry? How does the author's message change in this transition? Which aspects of the poet's novel can be encountered in a specific work? These are the research questions I will be addressing in this thesis about the phenomenon of the poet's novel, taking into consideration two authors who come from different backgrounds and generations: Sylvia Plath and Ocean Vuong. It is, however, necessary to specify that, with this paper, I do not mean to find the exact reason why poets across nationalities and generations write novels—since each case is different from another—but rather consider these two poets in particular, whose writing resonates with my artistic sensibility. I will also offer an in-depth analysis of their poems and see the similarities and differences with their fiction. As a writer myself, I feel more comfortable writing poetry than prose, maybe because, in my mind, it allows me more freedom to express what I feel and to experiment. On the other hand, I am not excluding that I will write a short story collection someday, or even a novel, which is why I admire those writers who challenge themselves by experimenting with a different genre from the one they feel most comfortable with.

In my research project, I will first explain Aristotle's theories on plot and the elements that are part of a story, to see how modern writers have broken these rules in the first half of the twentieth century to cause a literary revolution. Then I will illustrate the contributions of Modernism to the definition of genres, especially how the long poem genre mastered by T. S. Eliot in *The Waste Land* contributed to the development of the verse novel which Patrick D. Murphy discusses in his essay "The Verse Novel: A Modern American Poetic Genre." In this

first section, I will also refer to Gertrude Stein's *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*, an example of a modern poet writing a novel. After that, I will give an example of a novel whose narrative is not driven by plot but by other devices such as dialogue and soliloquies: *Malina*, by Ingeborg Bachmann. On the other hand, I will determine when poetry is narrative, referring back to T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* to give some concrete examples of a plot-driven poem. I will then explain the transition from the modern long poem to the verse novel, as exemplified by Murphy in his above-mentioned essay. Finally, I look for the characteristics that define the verse novel in "the poet's novel," the term used by Ian Rae in his book, *From Cohen to Carson: The Poet's Novel in Canada*. Similar to what the author does with Canadian literature, I will analyze Plath and Vuong's transition from poetry to prose, to see how their poetic style helped them achieve this.

Plath's novel, *The Bell Jar*, perfectly reflects her *ouvre* in terms of theme, although its language is a bit more accessible and its tone wittier than most of her poems, full of archaism and complex sentences. The protagonist, Esther, questions her place in the world throughout the novel, a struggle that is exemplified in the fig metaphor central to the whole novel: interestingly, Plath references a fig tree in her poem *Departure*. However, it is not the only analogy that can be found between her poetry and her prose: from her helpless love poems to those centered on the father figure, to those with historical references, these themes are also present in *The Bell Jar*. I selected this work because I find it extremely poignant in terms of feeling uncertain about the future or, as Plath put it, the desire of wanting two mutually exclusive things at the same time. This is an idea that Plath explored in her poems but rendered more clearly in *The Bell Jar*, perhaps also more vividly than in her poetry.

Ocean Vuong's prose in *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* is extremely refined, with a strong poetic quality to it, although it is a novel. Most of Vuong's poems have unique layouts on the page that make his lines stand out even more, as well as experimenting with different forms coming from the Asian and European literary tradition (the aubade and the haibun): some of these poems are "Trojan," "Aubade With Burning City," "My Father Writes from Prison," "Seventh Circle of Earth" and "In Newport." In this section, I will briefly mention another contemporary author: Ben Lerner, who has published three novels—*Leaving the Atocha Station, 10:04*, and *The Topeka School*—and the book-length essay *The Hatred of Poetry*, explaining his position on the connection between poetry and prose (which might have influenced Vuong's writing). *On Earth* serves to gather all of Vuong's themes together—family, sexuality, identity, Asian immigration—which form the center of the work. Moreover, Plath and Vuong both construct their works around themes that are very similar—namely, the absence of a father figure, struggles with mental illness, and heritage, to name a few—apart from the fact that they're drawing from their own experiences, which makes the narration visceral and draws the reader close to the author.

Finally, the ultimate question I will be answering is: why do poets write novels? Is it to increase their chances to sell? To draw more attention to their next poetry collection from a public of mostly prose-readers? Or do they want to express something they could not have expressed in their poems, maybe using a different medium? Whatever those reasons might be, Plath and Vuong deliver beautifully written contributions to the ongoing dialogue concerning the worthiness and purpose of poetry and prose, teaching us that boundaries and genres are not fixed, but flexible.

Part Two

Framing the Poet's Novel

> A Guitar.
>
> A guitar is a circle all around dotted piece of paper and the circle is polls of dark tea that the woods on the chair and that the books under the house made of sad yellow exit. Say the bottle with the column and say the brick with the mud that air below the above that say despair that say useless slice of floor and say and say the white the yellow the green then say helmet that the shoe the shirt the hat and say. Popcorn is not a color.
>
> (My imitation of Gertrude Stein's style)

What constitutes plot?

Let us start by investigating the possibilities of plot in poetry and prose. Greek philosopher Aristotle was the first in the West to establish rules of how storytelling works and what its main components are according to the different genres popular during his time. In the chapter dedicated to "Plot and Character," Elizabeth Belfiore defines the plot-character dynamics according to Aristotle, establishing that, for a tragedy to be well-executed, the author should privilege the plot rather than the characters (84): Belfiore explains this by stating that "Plot is not only most important, it is the only essential part of tragedy. Character is strictly secondary: […]. Because tragedy is imitation of action and not of character, it is the plot structure rather than *ēthos* that accomplishes the function of tragedy" (85). Belfiore also states that plot has a natural order, proceeding from the beginning to the middle to then conclude in the ending, which gives the tragedy a definitive structure and well-defined laws (85). Aristotle even goes as far as stating that the plot is "the first principle, and, as it were, the soul of tragedy" (Belfiore 3), without which a story could not exist in the first place. However, as we will see, this "natural order" of

events in a story that constitutes the plot has been revolutionized time and time again by modern and post-modern authors, proving that the order Aristotle talks about is not natural as much as a Western cultural norm.

Aristotle also defines the relationship between the plot and the real-life events on which the plot is based, which explains the definition of tragedy as "imitation of action:" in everyday life, action is caused by *ēthos*, without which it would be impossible to know the causes of the *dramatic* action (Belfiore 89). Therefore, although Aristotle places the whole meaning of a tragedy in the plot, he does recognize that, without *ēthos* and therefore a good development of character, a tragedy would be "colorless," as he himself puts it (Belfiore 89). Belfiore gives a very clear example to explain this: a murder would be deprived of all its emotional power—or *pathos*—if it was to be performed without a reason behind it coming from the characters (89). The characters, therefore, are what give color to tragedy: they might not be the skeleton of tragedy, but they have a role that is more important than what Aristotle admits, perhaps because Greek tragedy deals in archetypes rather than individuals.

As I will prove, the long poem and, more recently, the poet's novel do not follow these fixed rules regarding the plot. Rather, they give characters and their development a much more important role than the plot itself. For instance, in Ben Lerner's novel *10:04*, published in 2014, the reader can surely follow the series of events that unfold and recognize some themes that run throughout such as having children, the art of writing, living in New York City, illness, and, as indicated by the epitaph before Part One, the concept that "Everything will be as it is now, just a little different." However, it is ultimately the characters—the narrator, his friend/lover Alex, his pupil Roberto—that are central to the novel, the reason why the reader keeps reading. The narrator's never-ending soliloquies and paranoias interest the reader more than the plot itself,

which, at its core, is not composed by striking events. This is just one example of a contemporary author deciding to ignore Aristotle's rules on storytelling, a tendency that has been prevalent during the first half of the twentieth century.

What has Modernism left us with in terms of genres?

Literature and storytelling have quite changed since Aristotle's time, and in order to understand how the poet's novel might have come into being, we now have to look at the modernist heritage which poets and novelists living today, in the post-modern and contemporary era, have taken advantage of. As Edward Stankiewicz explains in *Linguistics*, Aristotle made a clear distinction between the three main genres of his time: the drama, the epic, and the lyric, which, according to Stankiewicz, correspond to today's novel and modern poetry respectively (171). While drama and epic are characterized by the presence of a narrated event ("a story or a plot that evolves in time and moves ineluctably towards a resolution") and a narrator or speech event that "advances and comments on the narrative and its protagonists," the lyric does not require the use of a narrative and therefore does not have a distinctive narrator (Stankiewicz 171). Rae further expands on this definition by stating that, although the term lyric originated to refer to the instrument that was used to accompany the singing of the original lyrics, "twentieth-century free verse dispensed with rigid conventions of meter and structure, and the descriptor lyric came to encompass a broad range of styles and sensibilities, including those of prose" (10). In *Centripetal*, Stankiewicz states that all modern forms proceed from a modernist philosophy: "The self-centered orientation of contemporary art and the renunciation of a unified point of view have led the modern poet to give up the sustained schemes of 'classical' art and to reconcile himself to works with unstable reference" (229). Modern writers do not follow these basic distinctions between genres and the role of the narrator and the speech event that determines this

characterization: rather, they create a new way to tell a story that defies all labels which cannot be confidently distinguished as poetry, prose, or drama. Essentially, modern poets are breaking the rules set by Aristotle during his time, thus giving up the traditional model of storytelling for a new, exciting era of cross-genre experimentation**.** The result of this poetic tendency is shown in the experimentation that modern and contemporary writers enact in literary forms.

One example of this novelization of language in poetry and vice versa is found in the works of two Modernist authors: T. S. Eliot in his long poem *The Waste Land* and Gertrude Stein in *Tender Buttons* and *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*. Both authors wrote these works as poets at the beginning of their careers: while the former challenged traditional conventions about poetry's length and narration, the latter wrote an autobiography disguised as somebody else's, which the reader only realizes at the very end of the book. According to Murphy, modern long poems usually focus on contemporary reality (59), and that is what Eliot does in *The Waste Land*: through hidden autobiographical and historical references, he narrates a story of awakening and spirituality told by several individuals, thus challenging Aristotle's division and definition of genres. As we have just seen, Aristotle attributed narration to the epic and the drama but not the lyric. However, T. S. Eliot is telling a story in *The Waste Land,* no matter how enigmatic it is, therefore proving that poetry can have a plot and a narrative quality. This choice might have inspired post-modern and contemporary poets to go a step further and turn the long poem into a full-length novel that, although written in prose, still retains some poetic qualities thanks to the author's style. Although *The Waste Land* is the first example that comes to mind when one thinks about the contribution of Modernism to the birth of the poet's novel, Eliot was not the only poet who experimented with poetry by blending it with elements that are typically associated with prose.

Stein's works, too, blur the line between poetry and prose. Speaking about narrative, Francine Prose notes how, "though students of writing are usually instructed—with good reason—that it is necessary to pick a point of view and stick to it, this, like any 'rule,' can be circumvented by any writer skillful enough to get away with it" (93). And Gertrude Stein was one of them. Prose describes the *Autobiography* as "a first-person narrative disguised as someone else's memoir" (93), of which the reader is aware of at the very end of the book, which closes with this line:

> About six weeks ago Gertrude Stein said, it does not look to me as if you were ever going to write that autobiography. You know what I am going to do. I am going to write it for you. I am going to write as simply as Defoe did the autobiography of Robinson Crusoe. And she has and this is it. (272)

Ironically, Gertrude Stein is talking about herself in the third person, writing from the point of view of her life partner Alice B. Toklas. Charles O. Hartman explains this peculiar choice as follows:

> The poet dissatisfied with the present state of poetic language always moves forward by moving back; but he can return either to earlier and more precise literary models, or to speech as he hears it. […] And the virulence of attacks on free verse demonstrates it represented a drastic revision of the contract between poet and reader. (143)

As proven by her collection *Tender Buttons*, Stein was committed to revolutionizing not only the way poetic language is perceived but the syntax itself as well as the logical relationships between words. In her poem "A Carafe, That Is A Blind Glass," she writes:

> A kind in glass and a cousin, a spectacle and nothing strange a
> single hurt color and an arrangement in a system to pointing. All
> this and not ordinary, not unordered in not resembling. The
> difference is spreading. (*Tender Buttons,* 1)

Stein's choice might have been determined by a sense of dissatisfaction towards the way language was used during her times, which pushed her to find her unique way of writing poetry, a tendency that continued with postmodernism which, according to Fredric Jameson, can be defined as "an attempt to think the present historically in an age that has forgotten how to think historically in the first place" (ix). Unlike Modernism, which "thought compulsively about the New" in Utopian or essential fashion, postmodernism is more "formal and distracted" (Jameson ix). Modern authors were constantly looking for what Jameson calls "the New," and an example of this might be found in the Italian movement of Futurism, whose members called for the destruction of everything that was connected to the past, including libraries, museums, and churches (Rainey et al. 1-2). Stein might have found her motivation to reinvent language in the hundreds of books she read in her youth, written before the arrival of Modernism, the movement that has redefined the meaning of poetry and prose and inspired post-modern writers to experiment with the style by blending poetry and prose and resulting in new genres that cannot easily be labeled as either-or.

Can a novel be non-plot-driven?

After defining what constitutes plot, it is useful to determine if and when a novel is not driven by it, as such. Contrary to Aristotle's theories on traditional narrative discourse, in poetic fiction, plot is advanced through dramatic action, such as dialogues, soliloquies, and character behavior; furthermore, a text can be characterized by double-voiced discourse and polyphony, meaning the presence of a variety of "languages" in a given text (Murphy 61-62). These features could be already found in *The Waste Land*, narrated by a variety of narrators in different, mysterious circumstances: for instance, the second section, "A Game of Chess," opens with two women talking about someone who had an abortion, before the scene switches to—presumably—a man and a woman arguing. This variety of voices, as well as soliloquies, is what might have influenced the development of the poet's novel, whose primary aim is not to tell a story through dramatic action but through the characters' behavior and humanity.

One novel that does not fit the traditional canons of storytelling is *Malina* by Austrian poet and playwright Ingeborg Bachmann. The novel, the chaotic romantic confessions of a nameless woman living in post-war Vienna, is told completely through these alternative narrative techniques: for instance, dialogue is rendered either in verse form or as a script. In the book *Understanding Ingeborg Bachmann*, Karen Achberger explains the unorthodox plot of the story as follows: "In Malina, it is the nameless first-person narrator who in the end disappears into a crack in the wall and is survived by her male counterpart, Malina, after a hopeless love affair with the Hungarian, Ivan" (96). Achberger further explains that the narrator of the story, in need of love and freedom, is oppressed by the patriarchal society she lives in, almost as if her true self was murdered (96). According to Murphy, modern poetic fiction and modern prose fiction share multiple points of view in which the story can be narrated or, if the characters are used to advance the "narrated event" through their own speech and actions, even non-narrated (58).

Although *Malina* only presents one point of view, the story is essentially non-narrated, but instead brought forward by the narrator's soliloquies and occasional conversations with Malina and Ivan. What is interesting is that, while the conversations between Malina and Ivan are rendered through dialogue, Bachmann decided to represent the conversations between her and Ivan in a playwriting style. Here is an example of how the conversations between the narrator and Ivan are rendered on the page:

> Hello. Hello?
>
> It's me, who'd you think?
>
> Oh right, of course, sorry
>
> How I am? And you?
>
> I don't know. This evening?
>
> I can barely understand you
>
> Barely? What? So you can
>
> I can't hear you very well, can you
>
> What… is something? (25)

And here is an example of how the conversations between the narrator and Malina are rendered:

> Me: What are your bronchia doing? Do you really have bronchia?
>
> Malina: What not? Why shouldn't I? Everybody has bronchia. Since when are you concerned about my health?
>
> Me: I'm only asking. How are things today, was it very stormy?

Malina: Where? Certainly not in the Arsenal. Not that I would know. I was filing documents. (221)

Although it would be hard for any reader to clearly define the story told in the novel, it is not what its focus is in the first place, nor what Bachmann's aim was: rather, she wanted to show the psyche of a broken woman torn apart by her own society, so insignificant that, by the end, it is almost like she has never existed, as Malina tells the police:

Excuse me?

No?

Then I didn't express myself clearly.

There must be some mistake.

The number is 723144.

Yes, Ungargasse 6.

No, there isn't.

There is no woman here,

I'm telling you, there was never anyone here by that name.

No one else is here.

My number is 723144.

My name?

Malina. (282)

But what name? The reader never knows the narrator's name, only Malina's and Ivan's. Despite her endless monologue, by the end, it is as if the narrator has never known her at all. Hence the narrator's conclusion: "It was murder" (283). This is precisely why, in some cases, the plot does

not constitute the soul of the story. In poetic fiction, in novels like *Malina*, the narrative is not only given by the story but also by the unwritten elements implied in the narrator's voice that the reader has to decode: according to Murphy, "as the poem is an utterance, its meaning is shaped by the interaction of author, reader, and text within a specific cultural environment, and the meaning of the text alters as the environment alters" (59). Although this statement is true of every text, when a novel lacks a linear storyline, the reader is freer to make sense of what is happening by granting their own interpretations.

Some critics also make a distinction between the aesthetic object and the material object: in *Structure*, Jan Mukarôvsky writes that "aesthetic value does not concern the material work but rather the 'aesthetic object' which originates through the interpenetration of impulses arising from the material work and the living aesthetic tradition of the given art" (64); therefore, the "aesthetic object" is constituted by the interaction between the reader and the text, as well as the many interpretations that can arise from this contract between the author and the reader. The poet is not merely arranging words, but they are also creating something completely new. In *Formal*, Bakhtin states that "When the poet selects words, their combinations, and their compositional arrangement, he selects, combines, and arranges the evaluations lodged in them as well. […] These existed before the poet took them, reevaluated them, and gave them new nuances" (123). The poet is then a composer of words, aiming to give rhythm and cadence to their works, and such devices inevitably reflect in the poet's prose, inventing new, unique ways of writing a novel that traditional novelists might not even imagine. One of the elements that caused this poetic revolution is that written language has become more informal and colloquial, which, according to Murphy, distinguishes the historical long poem—requiring "stylized and elevated literary 'language' and rejecting the 'living *parole*'"—from the modern long poem, which imitates the

"movement toward the rhythms and diction of daily speech" (60). This explains why doubled-voiced discourse and polyphony—meaning the presence of a variety of "languages" in a given text—can be applied to poetry as well as to modern prose (Murphy 61). Just like Eliot attempts to imitation informal speech in *The Waste Land* with a variety of voices, modern poet's novels such as Bachmann's may use more than one style to progress their narration, oftentimes choosing an informal tone. Once again, Modernism enacts a revolution of language by rejecting strictly formal language and favoring a style that comes close to what Murphy defines as "the living *parole*," and that is what makes modern and post-modern poets stand out from those that came before them.

When is poetry narrative?

In *Dialogic*, M.M. Bakhtin claims that "novelistic discourse is poetic discourse," however different from the current definition of "poetic" (269). But the opposite may also be true, meaning that poetic discourse is novelistic discourse, although its form does not fit within the labels of what is considered "novelistic." In his book *The Russian Novel from Pushkin to Pasternak*, Michael Aucouturier explains Bakhtin's position as follows:

> For Bakhtin the constitutive "mode" of the novel is not epic narration but dialogue; that is, the relationship that is established, thanks to the essentially "dialogical" nature of the novelistic word, among several autonomous discourses in respect to which the author himself takes the position of an interlocutor and not of a sovereign master. (238)

The dialogical aspect of the novel—not only between its characters but between the author and the reader—is what constitutes the element of reader-response in a given novel: in this case, the

novelist is not an authority over the readers, but they, rather, put themselves on the same level as the reader, openly accepting their individual interpretations of the text just as in poetry. In fact, in *Malina* Bachmann renders the dialogue between the narrator and her lover Ivan (particularly over the phone) in the form of poetic lines, although the language she uses is not elevated.

What does it mean, according to Bakhtin, that poems have become novelized? He writes:

> They become more free and flexible, their language renews itself by incorporating extraliterary heteroglossia and the "novelistic" layers of literary language, they become dialogized, permeated with laughter, irony, humor, elements of self-parody and finally—this is the most important thing—the novel inserts into these other genres an indeterminacy […]. (*Dialogic*, 6-7)

Essentially, Bakhtin is saying that the definition of "poetic" is expanded, without excluding form. Also, V.V. Ivanov refers to this new freedom as the "prosaization" of poetry, a phenomenon typical of the twentieth century which emphasizes "the word which is direct and immediately oriented toward its object," also referred to as "dialogic relationships" (199-200). Therefore, the critics of the modern long poem and, later, the verse novel, attribute great importance to the informal spoken word and how it is rendered into poetry.

Robinson Jeffers believes that the colloquialization of poetry is an inevitable process:

> It became evident to me that poetry—if it was to survive at all—must reclaim some of the power and reality that it was so hastily surrendering to prose. The modern French poetry of that time, and the most "modern" of the English poetry, seemed to me thoroughly defeatist, as if poetry were in terror of prose. (xiv)

In our contemporary world where poetry is becoming less and less popular, it necessarily needs to acquire some elements that are traditionally associated with prose—perhaps a hint of plot and character development. This might have inspired some post-modern and contemporary writers to not only write poems that are more accessible to the general public but writing actual prose with some poetic elements to it. As Rae paraphrases James Reaney's words, "as poets, we've fought the novel and lost" (5). However, this inspired poets to blend different styles and genres to create something that no prose writer might have created if they were not exposed to poetry for a long time. Therefore, what had initially been considered a defeat for the world of poetry later turned out to be a source of creativity for many authors.

From the Modern Long Poem to the Verse Novel

Various critics, including Murphy and Bakhtin, studied the process which led the modern long poem to become the verse novel as we know it today. Some of the characteristics of the long poem that played a major role in the birth of the verse novel are the following. First of all, some modernist long poems had a much more diverse audience to interact with, due to historical and social factors such as changes in mass literacy, educational emphasis, cultural diversity, and special thematic interest groups (Murphy 65). This variety of readers also benefitted the development and success of the verse novel later on. Secondly, long poems are predominantly novelistic in terms of genre form, instead of being epic or lyric (Murphy 66): this fact represents a strong break from the past and is more oriented towards the future. Thirdly, as Murphy writes, there are "no limitations of theme" in the long poem (67), which shows in works such as Eliot's *The Waste Land*, where it is difficult to identify a definitive number of themes, but rather the reader discovers more and more thematic elements as they continue reading the poem.

After defining what made the modern long poem unique at the time it was popular, it is worth looking at the main features of the verse novel to see which elements it inherited from the former genres and how it evolved. Firstly, the work is oriented toward the listener and perceiver by its thematic content (Bakhtin, *Formal*, 130-31). Secondly, as typical of poetry, the verse novel is enriched by the contribution of the readers, who bring their own perspective and sensibility to the interpretation of the verse novel; as Murphy puts it, "the reader of a modern verse novel brings to that poem a text/reader contract based primarily on the expectations and conventions of modern prose reading in terms of redundancy level, plot complexity, and narrative structure" (65). Thirdly, there is an emphasis on plot, narration, and characterization that poems—whether long or short—do not usually have: Murphy states that "the modern verse novel has an underlying plot and a series of speech events that advance and/or comment on that plot's characters, actions, and themes." (66). An example of this might be drawn from *The Waste Land*, which presents a series of episodes that build up increasing tension for the ending of the poems, just like a novel does. Therefore, Murphy seems to agree with Aristotle that, in order to distinguish the long poem from the verse novel—or, more simply, poetry from prose—the latter necessarily needs to follow a plot, meaning a series of events that build up to a resolution. Finally, just as mentioned before for the long poem, the verse novel finds no limitation of themes and it is influenced by the vibrancy of the living *parole*, meaning colloquial speech, freeing itself from the rules and constrictions of traditional prose.

What is the Poet's Novel?

While Murphy gives us an interesting definition of what he calls the "verse novel," it is Rae who mentions the term "poet's novel" in his book *From Cohen to Carson: The Poet's Novel in Canada*, where he discusses the tendency of Canadian contemporary fiction writers to

"continue as poets" (3), whose style blurs the lines between fiction and poetry just like in the verse novel. In this work, Rae has three main objectives: firstly, he breaks down the novels written by major Canadian poets to prove how their poetic work is translated into prose; secondly, he challenges the beliefs of some critics who dismiss the poet's novel as incoherent and formless; and finally, he argues that the success of the novels of these authors is derived from the literary techniques and figures of speech that they have learned during their poetic careers, as an extension of their "lyric practice" (4). Although Rae exclusively focuses on Canadian literature, his theories and analysis can also be applied to American literature and see how the novels of authors such as Sylvia Plath and Ocean Vuong fit into the genre of "poet's novels."

The clear distinctions between the drama and the epic or, according to today's standards, the poem and the novel, suggest, as Rae also explains, that genres cannot be blended with each other and that they must remain separated (3). Following Aristotle's thinking, W. R. Johnson argues that lyrical novels that rely on sentimentalism tend to be "bad novels," as narrative should be free from "lyrical aggressions" (Rae 261), meaning influences coming from poetry. In investigating these negative claims about the poet's novel, he attempts to answer what critic Fraser Sutherland defines as the "one unanswered question of Canadian literature: meaning why so many celebrated fiction writers begin and continue as poets" (Rae 3). It is interesting to notice how Sutherland first calls them "celebrated fiction writers" instead of poets: in this way, he is putting the fact that they are novelists before their far better-known reputation as poets. James Raney even suggests that poetry "fought and lost" against the novel (Rae 5). On the other hand, Rae, challenging the views of critics who dismiss the poet's novel as inchoate or formless, argues how the success of the novels of some Canadian authors derived from the narrative

techniques they learned while writing poetry, as an extension of their "lyric practice" (4). Therefore, these authors added to the importance of the novel with their poetic skills, they did not take anything away.

Once again, Rae here focuses on Canadian literature, but his points could be easily applied to American literature as well: specifically, to authors who, like Sylvia Plath, Ben Lerner and Ocean Vuong, who began their careers as poets and then later published novels that set them apart from contemporary novelists. In the next chapters, I will be analyzing Plath's and Vuong's poetry and prose works in detail in order to examine the following question: why are some projects and ideas conceived as poems and others as prose?

Part Three

Sylvia Plath: Life Inside the Bell Jar

Born in Boston in 1932 to a mother of Austrian descent and a Polish-German immigrant father, Sylvia Plath's life heavily influenced her art because of her deep introspection and her ability to fictionalize and poeticize her real-life experiences. Plath published two works during her lifetime: the poetry collection *The Colossus* and her only novel *The Bell Jar*, released in 1963, one month before her suicide (Bronfen 112). Plath's poems revolve around a few central themes: the dichotomy between love and death, the father figure, and her identity as a woman, all filled with allusions to history, and especially the Nazis, Jews, and World War II—likely recalling a tormented relationship to her German heritage. According to Pollitt as paraphrased by Elisabeth Bronfen, Plath discusses "a tightly connected cluster of concerns," such as metamorphosis, rebirth, the self as threatened by death, the otherness of the natural world, fertility, and sterility (63), which recall Eliot's themes in *The Waste Land*. However, unlike Eliot, Plath applies these mythological themes to the main events in her life that shaped her personality, namely "the death of her worshipped father when she was eight years old and the complex emotions of loss, guilt, and resentment it aroused in her even as an adult" (Bronfen 63).

Between Daddy Issues and Anti-Semitism

In "Daddy," Plath is describing the tragedy of the Holocaust by making it into an impossible father-daughter relationship, doomed to end up in tragedy after his death. In fact, she refers to his origins and his native German language with sounds such as "Achoo" (5), "Ach, du" (15), "Ich, ich, ich, ich" (27), as well as Nazi camps, such as the cities "Dachau, Auschwitz, Belsen" (33) or Nazi imagery like the "neat mustache" (43) the "Aryan eye, bright blue" (45),

the “swastika” (46) the “Fascist” (48), and the “Meinkampf look” (65). This is arguably Plath’s most political poem, yet she is not merely sending a political message, but symbolically communicating with her late father. And, even if the speaker of the poem is not to be conflated with the author, Plath was inevitably influenced by her origins.

> In the German tongue, in the Polish town
> Scraped flat by the roller
> Of wars, wars, wars.
> But the name of the town is common.
> My Polack friend (16-20)

She then continues by alluding more and more clearly to the Nazis and how she sees her father in their image, while at the same time she feels like a Jew whose life had been ruined by them:

> I have always been scared of *you*,
> With your Luftwaffe, your gobbledygook.
> And your neat mustache
> And your Aryan eye, bright blue.
> Panzer-man, panzer-man, O You— (41-45)

Another very autobiographical stanza is the following:

> Bit my pretty red heart in two.
> I was ten when they buried you.
> At twenty I tried to die
> And get back, back, back to you.
> I thought even the bones would do. (56-60)

Halfway through the poem, the speaker compares herself to a Jew, which might be her way to concede to her father's domination over her: "I began to talk like a Jew. / I think I may well be a Jew" (34-35). Generally, the speaker compares her father to Nazi Germany—or even Hitler—while she represents the Jews, persecuted and humiliated by antisemitic people who perpetrated the tragedies of the Holocaust. Here, Plath may be implying that the relationship with her father was similar to the relationship the Jewish people had with the Nazis—toxic and ultimately tragic. Although fearing and even loathing her father when she calls him "you bastard" (80) in the last stanza, for some reason she misses him and feels like she cannot live without him. According to Alejandro Villa Vásquez, "Daddy" might be a representation of the Electra Complex, as Plath herself confirmed in a 1962 BBC interview (par. 1): the speaker is attracted to her father and feels a sense of competition towards her mother, similar to the Oedipus complex in males. However, Plath does not mention a mother in her poem, but simply the father figure reinforced by the title itself—Daddy. This might mean that the speaker does not feel in competition with anyone else except herself, who is trying to win her father's sympathy despite knowing her own beliefs make this desire impossible. According to Villa Vásquez, this is Plath's failed attempt to "resolve the trauma that resulted from the initial impact of her father's death" (par. 1), eventually resulting in a disappointing outcome.

Despite the fact that "Daddy" can be considered a tragic love poem of a daughter to her father, Plath was surely used to ending her poems in a moving and enigmatic way. According to Bronfen, in "Lady Lazarus" "Plath's resurrected figure of vengeance compares her suicide's body first to that of the victims of the Holocaust" (92). Lady Lazarus focuses on a female figure instead of a male one, and begins with:

I have done it again.

One year in every ten

I manage it— (1-3)

The readers ask themselves, “done what?” With the first line only, Plath manages to catch our attention and raise our curiosity for what is to follow. The second and third stanzas already give us a clearer time and location where the action might take place:

A sort of walking miracle, my skin

Bright as a Nazi lampshade,

My right foot

A paperweight,

My face, a featureless, fine

Jew linen. (4-9)

At this point in the poem, the connection to “Daddy” is evident: firstly, the foot refers back to the “black shoe / In which I have lived like a foot / For thirty years” (2-4); secondly, Plath mentions the “Nazi lampshade” (5) and the “Jew linen” (9), both drawing back to Jewish history almost eradicated by the Nazis. This time, Plath gives us a more visual depiction of the Holocaust by mentioning “The nose, the eye pits, the full set of teeth? / The sour breath” (13-14) and “These are my hands / My knees. / I may be skin and bone” (31-33). Although these images might be subtle, they do hint at a more graphic reality which is the terrible conditions of the Jews in concentration camps.

Besides the historical references, we can also find a narrative line that spans three decades—the time Plath was alive. This starts with the stanza:

This is Number Three.

What a trash

To annihilate each decade. (22-24)

The number three beginning with capital letters alludes to the Trinity in the Bible, but also to three major events in her life that take place every ten years, mirrored in "Daddy." Plath says, "The first time it happened I was ten" (35), and, if we look at the line "I was ten when they buried you" (56) in "Daddy," we understand she is talking about her father's death. She continues, "It was an accident. / The second time I meant / To last it out and not come back at all" (36-38), drawing back to "At twenty I tried to die / And get back, back, back to you" (58-59) in "Daddy." She is referring to her attempted suicide, which, unlike her father's accidental death, was intentional. Plath is writing about this in a very detached manner, as if she accepted that, sooner or later, she was going to die, an idea that almost becomes an obsession:

And I a smiling woman.

I am only thirty.

And like the cat I have nine times to die. (19-21)

[…]

Dying

Is an art, like everything else.

I do it exceptionally well.

I do it so it feels like hell.

I do it so it feels real.

I guess you could say I've a call. (43-48)

Here, Plath is morbidly stating that, being young, she has time to kill herself if she does not succeed the third time either. The mysterious action referred to in the first line, then, is the

presence of death in her life, first manifested with the death of her father and then with her suicide attempts.

Just like in "Daddy," Plath includes the German word "Herr," which means Mister or Mr., and referring therefore to a male figure: first, she calls out "Herr Doktor" and "Herr Enemy" (65-66), then "Herr God" and "Herr Lucifer" (79), which she envisions as male entities that might all symbolize contradictory ways of what her father means to her. Moreover, the word "Herr" looks and sounds like "Her" in English, which is interesting considering that, in German, it is used to refer to a man and not a woman. The last stanza has a different tone from the rest of the poem, almost like she is taking her revenge on a male figure—her father? Her past lovers?—foreshadowed with "Herr." She does do as follows:

> Out of the ash
>
> I rise with my red hair
>
> And I eat men like air. (82-84)

"Out of the ash" means after she is dead, but it also has a mythical connotation as it refers to the Greek folkloric figure of the phoenix, a bird that cyclically regenerates by arising from its own ashes (March and Barrett 398), which is the image that Plath is presenting here. She foreshadows this ending in the lines "I turn and burn. / Do not think I underestimate your great concern. / Ash, ash—" (71-73) which refer to this act of burning into ashes.

Plath also likes to play with forms and structures, such as the poems "Metaphors" and "Mad Girl's Love Song." Plath constructs the former poem around the number nine, listing apparently unrelated objects that all happen to signify one thing: pregnancy. The poem has nine lines, and nine syllables each line:

> I'm a riddle in nine syllables,

An elephant, a ponderous house,

A melon strolling on two tendrils.

O red fruit, ivory, fine timbers!

This loaf's big with its yeasty rising.

Money's new-minted in this fat purse.

I'm a means, a stage, a cow in calf.

I've eaten a bag of green apples,

Boarded the train there's no getting off. (1-9)

The imagery she chooses—an elephant, a house, a ripening melon, a bag of green apples—may seem playful at first, but the tone of the poem shifts at the very last line, "Boarded the train there's no getting off" (9), which indicates that her pregnancy will inevitably lead to her becoming a mother, a role that perhaps she does not feel fit for. Plath is also criticizing the pressure that is put on women to have children: she is merely "a means, a stage, a cow in calf" (7) not a valued human being. "Mad Girl's Love Song," instead, is a villanelle, a genre that relies on the repetition of two key lines, which in this case are "I shut my eyes and all the world drops dead" (1) and "(I think I made you up inside my head)" (3):

The stars go waltzing out in blue and red,

And arbitrary blackness gallops in:

I shut my eyes and all the world drops dead.

I dreamed that you bewitched me into bed

And sung me moon-struck, kissed me quite insane.

(I think I made you up inside my head.) (4-9)

While the colors in her mind turn to blackness, she dreams about being seduced by her man. The repetition ultimately brings the poem to an end:

> I should have loved a thunderbird instead;
>
> At least when spring comes they roar back again.
>
> I shut my eyes and all the world drops dead.
>
> (I think I made you up inside my head.) (16-19)

Here, the speaker is asking whether her lover was sincere, or if his personality was constructed by the way she sees him in her mind. Her heart breaks as she understands that, unlike a thunderbird who cyclically goes back to where it came from, her lover will leave her forever. The rhyme scheme imposed by the villanelle further reinforces the poem's poignant effect on the reader, and the heartbreaking message it conveys.

Both of these poems not only show Plath's pessimistic vision of love and womanhood, but they also prove that she was able to reflect her everyday reality into her poems, despite her often enigmatic tone which creates distance between the author and the reader. According to Bronfen, while the symmetry of verse and balance in poetic structure leads to the deployment of a fixed, changeless, even stillborn, energy in *The Colossus*, her later poetry exhibits "an ongoing, lively dialectic between inertia and energy in which the speaker continually takes different shapes, none final, all exploratory" (63). On the other hand, *The Bell Jar* stands as the account of a naïve suburban girl who has the chance to spend a month in New York City. Bronfen presents the novel as "Plath's autobiographical novel about her time as a guest editor at *Mademoiselle Magazine* in New York, her nervous breakdown and suicide attempt that summer, and her convalescence" (112). She therefore describes it as Plath's auto-fiction effort, in an attempt to draw inspiration from her own life to write her only novel.

Figs and Dreams

In Chapter Seven, Plath writes, “I saw my life branching out before me like the green fig tree in the story” (73), with which she begins the central metaphor of the novel. However, this comparison comes to her a few chapters earlier, when, flipping through the pages of a book sent by the *Ladies’ Day*, she stumbles on the story of a Jew, a nun and a fig tree:

> The fig-tree grew on a green lawn between the house of a Jewish man and a convent, and the Jewish man and a beautiful dark nun kept meeting at the tree to pick the ripe figs, until one day they saw an egg hatching in a bird’s nest on a branch of the tree, and as they watched the little bird peck its way out of the egg, they touched the backs of their hands together, and then the nun didn’t come out to pick fogs with the Jewish man any more but a mean-faces Catholic kitchen-maid came to pick them instead and counted up the figs the man picked after they were both through to be sure he hadn’t picked any more than she had, and the man was furious. (52)

It is not a coincidence that Plath tells a substory featuring a Jew, a word and figure that, as we saw, are often repeated in “Daddy.” Talking about her poetry, Bronfen mentions that “Level of plot that one can locate her other most successful mode of controlling experience” (63), which could be interpreted as the ability to link themes to each other to create one big narrative encompassing these micro-universes that create the world of the author. Just like in her poetry, the figure of the Jew is always included in a scenario of conflict, whether it is about a love affair or an unsuccessful father-daughter relationship. Once again, Plath might have chosen this minority for its tragic history and pitiable nature to send a straightforward message to her

readers. Or, she might have chosen it before it is both related to history and religion, fields she both draws from for images and symbols.

This little story is also a tale of forbidden love between two people whose beliefs do not meet, just like in Esther's failed affair with Buddy. The fig is also present in the Bible, which is something that connects both the Jewish man and the nun. According to Ryken et al., "the fig tree appears in the biblical record first in the prototypical tragedy of the Fall of humanity" as told in the Genesis (283). The fig tree, therefore, represents a fall from grace that ruins someone's life, and in this case, it is the Jewish man's and the nun's fall. The features of fruitfulness of the fig can be associated with the "failure to keep covenantal standards to be fruitful" which "could mean the loss of safety and God's judgment" (Ryken et al. 283):

> From the tip of every branch, like a fat purple fig, a wonderful future beckoned and winked. One fig was a husband and a happy home and children, and another fig was a famous poet and another fig was a brilliant professor, and another fig was Ee Gee, the amazing editor, and another fig was Europe and Africa and South America, and another fig was Constantin and Socrates and Attila and a pack of other lovers with queer names and off-beat professions, and another fig was an Olympic lady crew champion, and beyond and above these figs were many more figs I couldn't quite make out. (73)

This is the point of Esther's character: she is a passionate individual that has not yet found her place in the world, although she has a lot of potential. However, she is not confident that she will be able to achieve all of her goals because she desires "two mutually exclusive things at one and

the same time" (94). While today a woman might as well manage a family, career, and travel, in the 1950s and 1960s, women had significantly fewer options, and this is what pushes the protagonist to almost kill herself and enter a psychic ward despite being so promising and brilliant. Besides the figure of the fig tree, Esther is also a character in the Hebrew Bible: protagonist of the Book of Esther, she is described as the Jewish queen of a Persian king Ahasuerus (Littman 145-155). Plath's choice for her protagonist's name is certainly not a coincidence, and it was most likely aimed at reinforcing the image of the "Jew," a recurrent theme in her poetry as well as in her prose for, its historical weight.

Interestingly, Plath mentions a fig tree also in her poem "Departure," in which she writes:

> The figs on the fig tree in the yard are green;
> Green, also, the grapes on the green vine
> Shading the brickred porch tiles.
> The money's run out. (1-4)

After receiving a taste of bucolic bliss given by the green figs and vine, Plath proceeds to say that "the money's run out," a sentence that immediately brings the reader back to reality. In a way, this could be applied to the scene in *The Bell Jar,* too: in the case of the substory, the fig tree—representing nature—carelessly grows between a Jewish man's house and a convent, although it does not belong to either; while the love between the two finds an obstacle in their religious beliefs—especially considering that one is a nun, a woman meant to be hidden away and never create romantic bonds with anyone—nature, which brought them together, does not care about human problems, and it just stands there in eternal bliss. The same applies to the central metaphor: being blessed with intelligence—and sometimes cleverness—by nature, Esther might as well follow all of the passions she has and become whatever she wants, but the social

constructions of the society she lives in—where women are mostly expected to stay home and take care of their children—crushes all of her aspirations before she even has the chance to pursue them.

Neurotic as Hell

Going back to the theme of ambition that might be connected to the fig metaphor—in fact, she sees herself as a famous writer—Peter Klapes states that Esther sees her life as a fig tree as an "allegory for the experience of the desire for desire, the experience of which allows for the delay of authentic decision-making, or commitment" (4). However, although for Klapes this is a negative thing, Esther seems quite proud of her attitude:

> If neurotic is wanting two mutually exclusive things at one and the same time, then I'm neurotic as hell. I'll be flying back and forth between one mutually exclusive thing and another for the rest of my days. (94)

Perhaps at her young age she does not perceive this indecision as a concrete danger, just like she is used to eating whatever she wants because she says she does not gain weight. According to Klapes, this feature of her personality represents her struggle with commitment: Esther imaginarily experiences her own existence as a "closed, finite system, to which her every decision—so as not to break the bell-jar's glass—must conform" (3). At times, she lives as if her life were a mission, instead of enjoying it, as proved by her cleverness at school, where she has to prove that she is great even in a subject that she dislikes like biology.

Halfway through the novel, the setting and mood of the story shift and become much darker, as Esther moves back to her hometown and finds out that she will have to spend an entire summer at home, a perspective she does not enjoy. In a way, this change of tone is foreshadowed

by the very beginning of the novel when she mentions the electrocution of the Rosenbergs, a grim event that, at least in her mind, characterizes the summer when the events happen:

> It was a queer, sultry summer, the summer they electrocuted the Rosenbergs, and I didn't know what I was doing in New York. I'm stupid about executions. The idea of being electrocuted makes me sick, and that's all there was to read about in the papers—goggle-eyes headlines staring up at me on every street corner and at the fusty, peanut-smelling mouth of every subway. It had nothing to do with me, but I couldn't help wondering what it would be like, being burned alive all along your nerves.
>
> I thought it must be the worst thing in the world. (1)

The fact that she could not think of another, more positive references to characterize the setting means that she chose the electrocution of the Rosenbergs for a reason—maybe to indicate her obsession with death. Although she calls herself "stupid about executions," she continues elaborating on that particular piece of news, and she even wonders about "being burned alive all along your nerves." This is arguably something that a person who feels sick about the death penalty would mention. On the other hand, she does mention that all the newspapers were talking about that case that summer, and therefore she has been force-fed a story that she does not like. Together with the news of the execution of the Rosenbergs, she admits that "I didn't know what I was doing in New York," which immediately shifts the attention back to herself, almost contributing to creating a parallel between the sad news of the death penalty and herself being forced to live in a place she does not feel her own: "New York was bad enough" (1), she says, as

if living the city—even for a short period of time—was the most awful thing that ever happened to her.

Bronfen also noticed that Esther is unconsciously influenced by contemporary pop culture:

> In so far as this novel can be read as the autobiography of the coming-into-being of a writer across the fragments of contemporary cultural life,' most striking about these peregrinations through disparate strata of high and low art, [Jacqueline] Rose concludes, is that "Far more than the male literary tradition, it is popular writing, and especially popular writing by women, which oppresses—and generates—the woman writer in *The Bell Jar*." (113)

Particularly, Bronfen concentrates on two aspects of Plath's representation of the toxic side effects of the post-way American myth of happy, healthy, and successful good living (113). Firstly, "The regulative law of this culture, connected to the various mother figures in the novel, […] is shown to be the catalyst for her suicidal madness but also the […] call for recuperation and survival" (113). Esther is not happy about the role that she, as a woman, has been attributed by society, and this is why she comes across as a strange person to her peers working with her. Secondly, according to Bronfen, Plath's tone in *The Bells Jar* marks a shift from "the highly self-conscious prosody of the early poems and violence and rage of the *Ariel* poem," this time opting for "a narrative voice marked by self-irony, able to describe the pathos of cultural dislocation, the horror of a self-consuming madness, even while at the same time stepping away from this

overflow of destructive feelings" (114). Therefore, Esther's tone works as a coping mechanism to accept and face her unpleasant reality.

Soon after this bizarre beginning, she elaborates on this feeling of not belonging, as if she is aware that many of her peers would give everything to have the same opportunity she has.

> I was supposed to be having the time of my life.
>
> I was supposed to be the envy of thousands of other college girls
>
> just like me all over America who wanted nothing more than to be
>
> tripping about in those same size seven patent leather shoes. (2)

These paragraphs contribute to a more down-to-earth effect by humanizing the protagonist and her life: we learn that she was not born in wealth and that she does not often have the opportunity to live in the liveliest city in America. Thanks to her honesty and naiveness, Esther appears like a clueless but critical young woman, and therefore a character to be trusted by the reader. She is also criticizing the materialistic values of the American Dream, which is not about achieving happiness and freedom but is determined by how many possessions someone has, how fancy the place they live is, and how expensive their lifestyle. Instead, Esther, aware that her experience in New York is just temporary, does not elevate herself as her peers do. Here, Plath is also establishing her highly descriptive voice, her attention to the small details and her wittiness: she is just informally talking to the reader as if writing in her private diary, whose intimacy makes the invisible barrier between the novelistic world and the real world disappear.

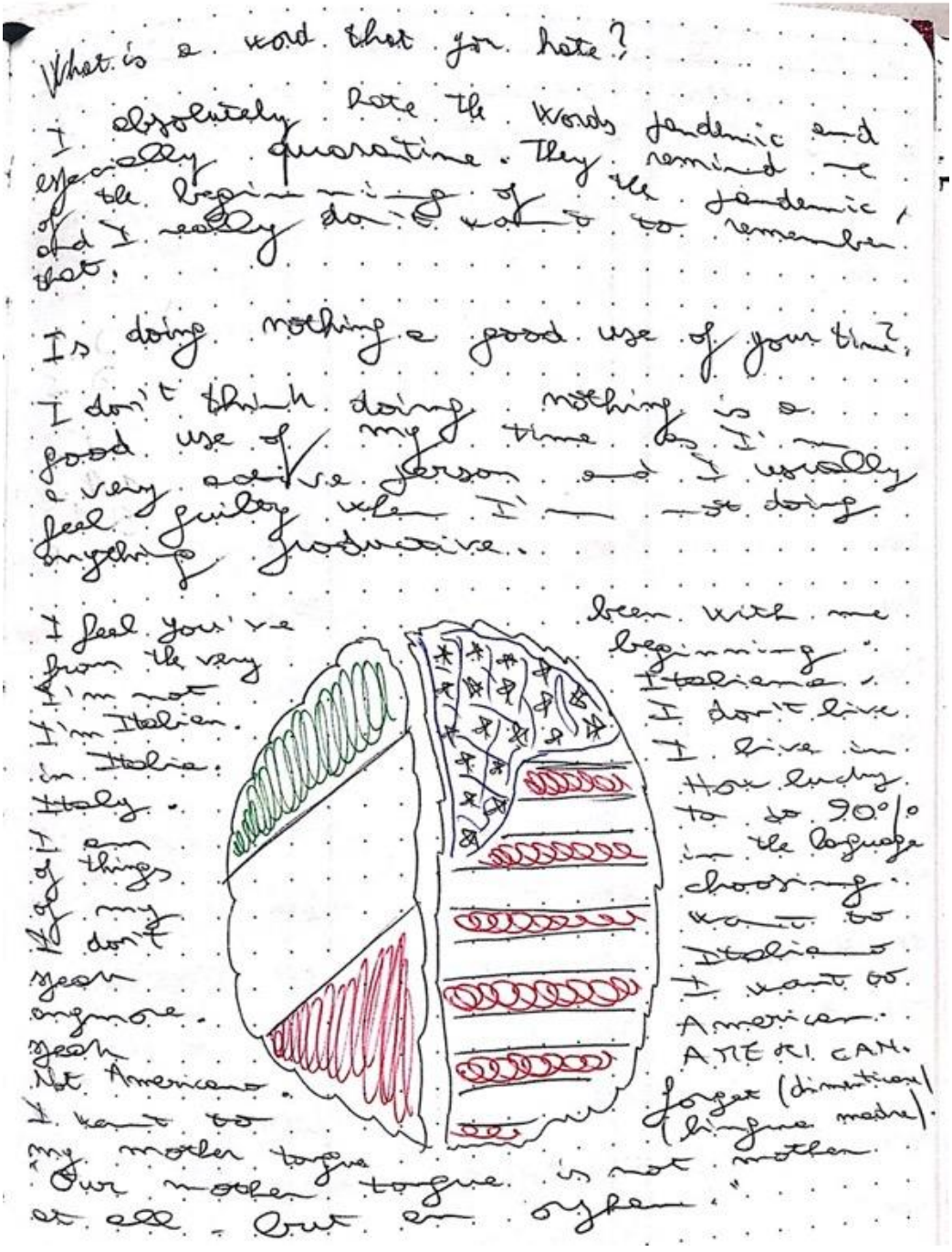
The themes of love, madness and ambition that characterize Plath's poetry are all present in *The Bell Jar*. "Mad Girl Love Song" might as well be written by Esther thinking about her beloved Buddy Willard, for whom she lost her mind. "Metaphors" might express Esther's refusal to having children and becoming mother against her will—although, eventually, she does indeed

marry someone and become a mother, as she signals in a flashforward that occurs a few paragraphs after the opening: “I use the lipsticks now and then, and last week I cut the plastic starfish off the sunglasses case for the baby to play with” (3). Just like this sense of confinement and claustrophobia in Plath’s poems, *The Bell Jar* is the story of a young girl who wants to be free but is not, either for societal or personal reasons. As Klapes notices, although Esther’s life is stuck between her dissatisfaction and her obsession for death, her freedom necessitates life, as do her ambitions (7).

So, why did Plath—a poet—write a novel titled *The Bell Jar*? Bronfen mentions that Plath herself wrote to her mother about it, asking her to not tell everyone and that it was just “a potboiler and just practice” (12). However, artists rarely make such great work only for commercial reasons: it would not make sense for Plath to share her story and make herself vulnerable just for the sake of money. Therefore, this novel might also be seen as her last cry for help before she took her own life, which goes beyond the purely materialistic gain and selling potential. Sylvia Plath’s poetry writing is perfectly reflected in her prose, which condenses the themes and elements that she mastered throughout her career, creating her own aesthetic of highly introspective and at times hopeless visions of a depressed mind. Esther’s peculiar view of the world is shown in the very first scene of *The Bell Jar*, opening with the Rosenbergs. Despite Klapes claims that Esther is a conformist (3), she definitely does not fit in the society she lives in, despite eventually getting married and having kids. This small detail might have been included to prove how the events narrated in the novel do not matter to her anymore, and whatever will be told is now insignificant, just like the makeup and accessories she still owns but rarely uses.

Part Four

Ocean Vuong: What is a Country?



(Ciabattoni)

Born in Saigon, Vietnam, in 1988, Ocean Vuong and his family immigrated to America during the Vietnam War and settled in Hartford, Connecticut; he then left Connecticut to pursue a BFA at Brooklyn College and then an MFA at NYU in New York City (González 83). During his undergraduate years, he had the chance to work with poet and novelist Ben Lerner, who currently teaches in the MFA Program in Poetry at Brooklyn College. At the beginning of Lerner's novel *Leaving the Atocha Station*, the protagonist, Adam, wins a fellowship to live in Madrid, Spain for a year. One day, he decides to visit the Prado Museum, where he witnesses a very curious scene: one of the visitors is suddenly hit by Stendhal Syndrome. Adam then starts comparing that scene with his love for poetry, revealing that he can only appreciate poetry when it is quoted in prose: he says, "in the essays my professors had assigned in college, where the line breaks were replaced with slashes" (9) This instance is the first time he actively compares poetry and prose and tries to decide which one of the two is "superior" to the other; however, although he initially feels like he can appreciate prose better than poetry, he then proceeds to describe the bizarre effect that poetry has on him:

> Reading poetry, if reading is even the word, was something else entirely. Poetry actively repelled my attention, it was opaque and thingly and refused to absorb me; its articles and conjunctions and prepositions failed to dissolve into feeling and a speed; you could fall into the spaces between words as you tried to link them up. (20)

Therefore, throughout the novel, Lerner questions his abilities and responsibilities as a poet living in the tense Catalan separatist political environment (44-45), for which he is even mocked by a character named Carlos who asks him, "Are you going to write a poem about the

bombings?" (134). Halfway through the novel, he tells his lover Teresa that "poems aren't *about* anything" (54) and he promises himself that he would never write a novel (65), which ironically is the one we are reading in that exact moment. In his essay *The Hatred of Poetry*, he continues elaborating and expanding his philosophy on what poetry is for by asking whether poetry makes us human. He recalls an episode that many might have experienced, which is that, as children, we were told that "we are all poets simply by virtue of being human" (par. 1) and that is the sole requirements to be considered as such—at least as long as we are children. Lerner continues, "If you are an adult foolish enough to tell another adult that you are (still!) a poet, they will often describe for you their falling away from poetry: *I wrote it in high school; I dabbled in college*. Almost never do they write it now" (par. 2). By giving this example, Lerner is exposing those people who need to give an explanation or an excuse as to why they do not write poetry anymore, because they were taught that everyone can be a poet. But, besides what happens when we grow up, we have all been, at least once in our lives, poets, and a professional poet could be compared to a child who never grows up.

The influence that Lerner had on Vuong is so significant that he addresses him in the acknowledgments section at the end of the book: "To Ben Lerner, without whom so much of my thinking and being as a writer would not be realized. Thank you for always reminding me that rules are merely tendencies, not truths, and genre borders only as real as our imaginations small." His undergraduate education is what might have inspired him to incorporate some poetic elements in his poetry and eventually writing a novel that sounds a lot like poetry.

Layout & Visual Component

Let us start the analysis of Vuong by focusing on the way he places words on paper, creating interesting layouts which not only make his poems appealing to readers but may also be

connected to the poems themselves thematically and conceptually. The most visually impressive of his poems may be the following:

Milkflower petals in the street

like pieces of a girl's dress.

May your days be merry and bright…

He fills a teacup with champagne, brings it to her lips.

Open, he says.

She opens. (1-6)

While in "Aubade with Burning City" the lines are scattered across the page, the lines in "My Father Writes from Prison" are divided by the slash (/), without which it could as well be considered a prose poem:

Lan oi,

Em khoe khong? Gio em dang o dau! Anh nho em va con qua. Hon

nua & there are things / I can say only in the dark / how one spring

/ I crushed a monarch midflight / just to know how it felt / to have

something change / in my hands / […] (18)

In "In Newport I Watch My Father Lay his Cheek to a Beached Dolphin's Wet Back," Vuong alternates lines written on the left side of the page with those written on the right side, which makes the reader's gaze jump from left to right and vice versa to follow the poem:

& close his eyes. His hair the shade

of its cracked flesh.

His right arm, inked with three falling

phoenixes – torches

marking the lives he had

or had not taken – cradles

the pinkish snout. Its teeth

gleaming like bullets. (1-8)

Instead, in "The Gift," Vuong talks about his mother's illiteracy, which forms the center of *On Earth*, by writing the first three letters of the alphabet three times on the same line, to then repeat the same process after a brief couplet:

a b c a b c a b c

She doesn't know what comes after.

So we begin again:

a b c a b c a b c (1-4)

However, the most peculiar layout might be found in "Seventh Circle of Earth," where the poem forms the footnotes of a non-existent text:

1. As if my finger, / tracing your collarbone / behind closed
   doors, / was enough / to erase myself. To forget / we built his
   house knowing / it won't last. How / does anyone stop / regret /
   without cutting / off his hands? / Another torch
2. streams through / the kitchen window, / another errant dove. /
   It's funny. I always knew / I'd be. warmest beside / my man. /
   But don't laugh. Understand me / when I say I burn best / when
   crowned / with your scent: that earth-sweat / & Old Spice I
   seek out each night / the days (39)

This layout might also recall T. S. Eliot's footnotes that he added to many editions of *The Waste Land* to facilitate readers' understanding of his work; such layout recalls nineteenth and twentieth-century poets who used to format their poems in the same way, such as e e cummings—whose pen name is a stylized version of his real name— French poet Guillaume Apollinaire's calligrams or Filippo Tommaso Marinetti's Futurist manifesto.

The epigraphs he cites before some poems are another interesting conceptual choice: the collection itself is proceeded with an epigraph by Bei Dao—"The landscape crossed out with a pen reappears here." It features quotes by Edmond Jabès for "Immigrant Haibun" ("The road which leads me to you is safe even when it runs into oceans"); an untranslated Vietnamese proverb in "Headfirst;" the cannibal serial killer Jeffrey Dahmer in "Into the Breach" ("The only motive that there were was was to … keep them with me as long as possible, even if it meant just keeping a part of them"); a headline from *Dallas Voice* in "Seventh Circle of Earth" ("On 27 April 2011, a gay couple, Michael Humphrey and Clayton Capshaw, was murdered by immolation in their home in Dallas, Texas"); Emily Dickinson in "To My Father / To My Future Son" ("The stars are not hereditary"). Vuong also includes other references in the "Notes & Acknowledgments" section at the end of the work. Although these quotes come from people of different backgrounds, they all represent the themes found in his poetry—and consequentially his prose: mythology to talk about personal events, American identity as an immigrant, first sexual experiences as a queer person, the link between family and trauma, and how language is used to reflect such trauma. In the next few chapters, I will show how Vuong approaches each theme in his poetry as well as how it appears in his novel *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous*.

Motherhood & Fatherhood & Mythology & Colors

Mythology is a constant in Vuong's poetry as can be seen by looking at the titles of some of his poems: while some of them are titled as figures of Greek mythology ("Telemachus," "Eurydice," "Odysseus Redux," "Trojan"), others reference this dimension less directly, such as "Of Thee I Sing," which could be associated to the Preface of the Iliad which invokes Achilles or to Walt Whitman's "My Country, 'Tis of Thee," or "Seventh Circle of Earth," which is similar to the seven circles of hell in the Inferno of Dante's *Divine Comedy*.

Interestingly, many of these "mythological" poems focus on the father figure, a figure Vuong lacked while growing up. Greek mythology presents a lot of father figures that might explain why Vuong alludes to it so much in his poems. Zeus, the father of all gods, is the husband of Hera, who also happens to be his sister, and, although they have a lot of children together, some of his offspring is the result of his extra-marital intercourses with other women on Olympus (March and Barrett 497-500). Despite being the main figure among the gods, he might be considered a controversial figure because he overthrew his father Cronus to become the sovereign of heaven himself, which might attribute a negative connotation of him not only as an unfaithful husband and a promiscuous father, but also an egotistical son (March and Barrett 497-500). On the other hand, we find a completely different type of father figure in Daedalus, who, to escape the Labyrinth in which he and his son Icarus are imprisoned, invents a pair of wings made of feathers and wax; however, Icarus ignores his warning of not flying too close to the sun, which causes the wax to melt and Icarus to fall to his death (March and Barrett 146-147). In this case, Daedalus is a caring father who remains heartbroken when his son dies, almost the complete opposite of Zeus. These are just two examples of the variety of father figures that might be encountered in Greek Mythology.

In *Night Sky*, Vuong dedicates his work: *tang me [và ba tôi]*, meaning *for my mother [& father]*, whose presence and absence is a recurrent theme in the collection. For instance, the opening poem mentions a "man showering" (4), which conveys sexuality but also intimacy, and it is ambiguous whether the speaker might be looking at a lover or his father; or he might be both talking about a father figure and expressing his attraction for men. It is not until the ninth couplet that we know for sure whom the speaker is talking about: "That one morning, my father would stop / - a dark colt paused in downpour –" (17-18). Therefore, it means that his father represents the threshold, the beginning of his poetic journey throughout *Night Sky with Exit Wounds*.

The second poem, "Telemachus," seems to be a sequel to "Threshold," judging by the very first lines: "Like any good son, I pull my father out / of the water, drag him by his hair // through white sand, his knuckles carving a trail / the waves wish in to erase. […]" (1-4). The poem is an allegory of the story of Telemachus, the son of Odysseus who leaves his mother and his home island Ithaca to look for his father who has been wandering the seas for ten years (March and Barrett 459-461), to whom Vuong compares himself. Just like in the opening, here we find water—typical of the story narrated in the Odyssey—and a son who is pulling his father out of it, maybe trying to prevent him from drowning, but it is too late: "The answer," he writes, "is the bullet hole in his back, brimming / with seawater" (10-12). Although he very well knows the man is his father, he somehow feels like he does not recognize him, as if his face belongs to somebody else; eventually, he proceeds to "begin / the faithful work of drowning" (23-24), a line which could refer to the speaker himself or his father. The poem "Trojan" concludes this trilogy of poems dedicated to Vuong's father at the beginning of the collection. According to Rigoberto González, Vuong draws parallels between Troy and Saigon, between Odysseus and his own father through Greek mythology, therefore giving a mythical and maybe even glorious tone to

his compositions (89). González also states that, in *On Earth*, "the conflict (the Vietnam War) that instigated the separation from the country and the absence of the father is a major presence in the book, hovering over the speaker like a harpy" (89), a theme that links Vuong's collection to his novel, especially considering the notions of fatherland and mother-tongue.

Apart from the theme of the father figure, Vuong uses color and symbolism to include other topics that I will be analyzing in the following sections. For instance, while "Threshold" and "Telemachus" start with a scene related to water, "Trojan" opens with fire, conveyed both by the "red dress" and the "flame" in the second line. Apart from red, Vuong also mentions the colors white and blue, which indirectly recall the American flag; however, the color red pervades the whole narrative and is conveyed by images such as "dress / petaling off him like the skin / of an apple" (11-13), the "heart / of his murderer" (18-19) and "a boy in a dress / the red of shut eyes / vanishes" (20-22), and, once again, the red of the burning city in the final line. The image of the boy in a dress also recalls Vuong's gender identity and sexuality. Moreover, this symphony of colors and the dress, this time worn by a girl and compared once again to a flower's petals, is presented in "Aubade with Burning City" as well: white Christmases (10), the girl's white dress (13), the black dog (17), the white curtain of snow (28), the red sky (31), the white city, and the (now) black of the girl's dress, like a dog (37-38).

American Identity & Immigration: Refusing to Die

Regarding the theme of identity, Vuong sometimes attributes a negative connotation to the word "American," which is used as a symbol to represent a larger ideology, a philosophy of life. An example of this is when Rose says, "This is American milk so you're gonna grow a lot. No doubt about it" (27), as if she believes that American products are better than products sold in other parts of the world.

> The time we went to Goodwill and piled the cart with items that had a yellow tag, because on that day a yellow tag meant an additional fifty percent off. I pushed the cart and leaped on the back bar, gliding, feeling rich with our bounty of discarded treasures. It was your birthday. We were splurging. "Do I look like a real American?" you said, pressing a white dress to your length. It was slightly too formal for you to have any occasion to wear, yet casual enough to hold a *possibility* of use. A chance. I nodded, grinning. The cart was so full by then I no longer saw what was ahead of me. (9)

This scene represents succinctly how young Little Dog sees his family and other Americans around him: the word "American," while pronounced enthusiastically by his mother, almost represents an unrealistic standard placed on them by those people who have already conformed to them. Fang interprets these questions as suggesting "a deeper conflict with Vuong's mother's American identity—that, even if one feels that they are 'American,' there remains the larger question of whether or not they truly exist as one" (29).

Vuong asks, maybe to his mother, maybe to himself or even his readers: "What is a country?" (8). He almost immediately responds to himself: "What is a country but a borderless sentence, a life?" (8), which later becomes, "what is a country but a life sentence?" (9). To Vuong, a country is more than just a place: it is an endless commitment, a sentence with a start but maybe no finish. He combines the concept of space with the concept of time: while a country can be measured in terms of space, and therefore the borders are referred to a country's territory, a life can be measured in terms of time, which might recall the lives of the people that inhabit the

country. The word "country" takes on a negative connotation when juxtaposed with "a life sentence," combining the other two terms of the previous line: here, Vuong compares living in a country—maybe American or Vietnam—to a prison. But why? Does Vuong feel stuck in his environment that he cannot leave? Maybe for moral implications? Being a writer, the connection between a country and a sentence—or a life sentence—might signify his mission towards his nation of adoption: he feels the need to write about America, a commitment what will accompany him for the rest of his life. Vuong then returns to reflect on the meaning of "country" with this sentences that he manipulates like the one we have just seen: "It is a beautiful country depending on where you look" (35), which, at the end of the section, becomes "it's a beautiful country, she's been told, depending on who you are" (36). Here, Vuong is referring to the experience of being an immigrant in the United States, looking for a community of people that might have gone through the same experiences as him.

The theme of immigration is also incorporated through two ancient literary forms that Vuong borrows for two of his poems: the aubade and the haibun. The former is a morning love poem about lovers separating at dawn (*Merriam-Webster Online*), which goes back to the troubadours of the Provencal schools of courtly love in the Middle Ages (Fauriel and Adler 412); the latter is a literary form originated in Japan which combines prose and haiku and is used as a form of autobiography, diary, travel journal, or even prose poem (Keene 233). "Immigrant Haibun" is composed of six prose paragraphs and one three-line haiku at the end: "Summer in the mind. / God opens his other eye: / two moons in the lake" (15). It tells the story—inspired by Vuong's origins—of a couple crossing the ocean to immigrate to America with their newborn baby: during this harsh trip, the father swears they would call their child Ocean after the waters they are trying to survive. Although, as he himself admitted, it is not the real reason why the poet

is called “Ocean” in the first place, this poem adds to the intensity of the narration, as if Vuong were aware of the fact that his life could be easily translated into fiction, which is what he does in *On Earth*.

One of the central themes of the novel is immigration, and the contrast between immigrants and Americans. We find a stereotyped description of Mr. Buford:

> Mr. Buford walked in. A tall, lanky white man of about seventy, he wore a Red Sox cap pulled low over a pair of aviators and a cheddar cheese grin. Hands on his hips, he reminded me of that maniac sergeant in *Full Metal Jacket,* the one who got his brains blown out by one of his own privates for being an asshole. (88-89)

This passage, which vaguely recalls the description of the headmaster in *Oliver Twist* by Charles Dickens, presents a character that is supposed to represent the average American citizen: a white, middle-aged straight man. When Little Dog mentions the scene in *Full Metal Jacket*, a movie that gives a dark satirical portrayal of the Vietnam War, he is comparing himself to the private who killed the sergeant to take his revenge on him. Perhaps it is his inner desire, but he cannot act on it.

Family & Trauma: Saved by Women

Vuong’s writing shows his complicated relationship with his family, cursed by the trauma of the Vietnam War: on the one hand, Vuong loves his family and wants to avenge his mother’s condition; on the other, however, he feels a lot of resentment towards his unknown father, as shown in his mythical poems. While the center of *Night Sky* might be the absence of a father figure, as shown in Vuong’s dedication of the work to his mother (and father), *On Earth* evolves around Rose, who not only is Vuong’s mother but also a refugee suffering from PTSD,

who tries to battle her mental disorder while raising a child in a foreign country. In *"I Refuse to Die:" The Poetics of Intergenerational Trauma in the Works of Li-Young Lee, Ocean Vuong, Cathy Park Hong, and Emily Jungmin Yoon*, Helli Fang exemplifies this strong link between family and trauma by stating that "in Little Dog's refusal to look away and fall victim to the boy's faux-shooting, Vuong assures that trauma will not overtake his story, nor the memory of his mother" (27). Vuong once claimed, "I was raised by women. I was saved by women" (Fang 28), and that is why his mother and grandmother have a central role in the novel: particularly, he often stresses their miserable conditions, as part of a group of people forgotten by society. Little Dog, just like Vuong, feels a big responsibility towards them—Vuong in the way he tells their story, and Little Dog in the way he becomes aware of their status in American society. The following scene is a perfect example of this attitude:

> The engine starts, the car lurches into a U-turn. As we pull away,
> from the porch, a boy, no older than I am, points a toy pistol at us.
> The gun sumps and his mouth makes blasting noises. His father
> turns to yell at him. He shoots once, two more times. From the
> window of my helicopter, I look at him. I look him dead in the
> eyes and do what you do. I refuse to die. (71)

In this last scene, which not only represents the end of the chapter but also the end of Part One, Vuong is creating a connection or parallelism between Little Dog in his car, and the little boy with the toy pistol. Vuong does not specify it, but it is likely that Little Dog might be looking at a white boy who happens to be his own age: they could be exactly the same, except for their difference in background. The boy raising his toy pistol at them—Little Dog does not say "me," but "us"—may represent the racist crimes committed every year towards the Asian

American community. Almost in confrontation, Little Dog looks at his "dead in the eyes" and calls the car he is in a "helicopter," which could mean that he is either disassociating from this kid or that he feels superior to him.

This scene happens in a matter of seconds, almost a glimpse, but Vuong manages to create tension even in the smallest details, in the tiniest perceptions of Little Dog's child mind. Here, Little Dog's tone is defensive, almost as if was is trying to defend his family with his gaze alone, challenging the "violent" act of the boy. Although there is no indication that the nameless boy might have pretended to fire a pistol at them because they are not white, Little Dog clearly sees it as such in his child-like mind. Just like his ancestors during the Vietnam War, he refuses to be erased because of his status as a queer immigrant.

Part Two of the novel opens with a scene that revolves around memory: "Memory is a choice," he writes, "You said that once, with your back to me, the way a god would say it. But if you were a god you would see them" (75). The focus of the scene then switches from the mother to the boys playing under the pine trees, which are not immediately identified but soon turn out to be Little Dog and a certain guy called "Trev." Midway through the scene, Vuong repeats the initial lines re-elaborating them: "If you were god you would tell them to stop clapping. You would tell them that the most useful thing one can do with empty hands is hold on. But you are not god" (76). Something is implied in Little Dog's words, a more serious matter that is not yet revealed to the readers, and that is when we are told who the figures are: "You're a woman. A mother, and your son is lying under the pines while you sit at a kitchen table across town, waiting again" (76). In stating the obvious fact that a mother is not a god, the writer is creating a relationship between them, as if a son does look at his mother as a god.

Little Dog then compares himself to a bullet inside of his mother's womb: "*It wasn't me,* the boy thinks, *who was inside my mother's womb, but this bullet, this seed I bloomed around*" (77). It may signify that Little Dog's birth was caused by a traumatic event and that he, therefore, originated from pain, but that is not the only possible interpretation. Although we initially do not know the relationship between these three figures—the mother, the boy and the bullet—we understand they are related somehow and that the outcome will somehow be violent, as suggested by the metaphor of the bullet. The final lines of the chapter are dedicated to Little Dog's unknown friend, Trev (or Trevor), whom he urges to tell a secret. "I'm not scared of dying anymore" (78), Trevor says, after building some tension. The two boys laugh, not taking his answer seriously. Although this may seem like an innocent moment, Little Dog is implying more, and that is when he ends the chapter with the following words: "Ma. You once told me that memory is a choice. But if you were god, you'd know it's a flood" (78). These sentences have a different meaning after reading them at the end of the chapter: they almost foreshadow what will happen later in the novel. Vuong is also attributing a negative connotation to memory, seen as something that overwhelms and sometimes even kills you.

Sexuality & Queer Identity: Unfucking

According to González, in some of Vuong's poems, "the speaker's sexuality is shaped by the keen awareness that the body takes its trauma to its love making" (91). Two poems that simplify this statement are "On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous" and "Ode to Masturbation." In the former poem, Vuong gives us a series of images, many of them related to the realm of sex and sexuality:

> Tell me it was for the hunger
>
> & nothing less. For hunger is to give

the body what it knows

it cannot keep. That this amber light

whittled down by another war

is all that pins my hands to your chest. (1-6)

The nine sections of the poem are separated by what could either a one in Roman numerals, or a multitude of I's which bring the focus back to the poet. In the third section, Vuong imagines a father figure locking himself in the bathroom to masturbate—"& so I learned – that a man in climax was the closest thing to surrender" (41)—which is an image that links together fatherhood and sexuality, an association which was presented more ambiguously in the opening poem "Threshold," where the speaker is watching his father in the water. We have other images related to sexuality in the following section, which sounds like the nonsensical chatter of a couple having sex:

Say surrender. Say alabaster. Switchblade.

Honeysuckle. Goldenrod. Say autumn.

Say autumn despite the green

in your eyes. Beauty despite

daylight. Say you'd kill for it. Unbreakable dawn

mounting in your throat.

My thrashing beneath you

like a sparrow stunned

with falling. (15-23)

The repetition of "say" reappears later on in another section:

Say amen. Say amend.

Say yes. Say yes

anyway. (25-27)

In “Ode to Masturbation,” Vuong once again presents his readers with images that either recall or are directly related to the physical senses:

because you

were never

holy

only beautiful

enough

to be found (1-6)

From the very beginning, Vuong juxtaposes the sacred to the beautiful and profane in addressing someone who was “never / holy / only beautiful,” unifying these two concepts in the image of the “holy water” (28). Throughout the poem, Vuong mentions body parts that allude to explicit scenarios, such as “mouth” (8), “hand” (14), “thighs” (31), “tongue” (44), “eyes” (52):

& sometimes

your hand

is all you have

to hold

yourself to this

world & it’s

the sound not

the prayer

that enters

the thunder not

the lighting

that wakes you (13-24)

Vuong's reflections on his sexuality are mirrored in his novel, specifically in those passages where Little Dog has sex with Trevor. During what is most likely his first sexual experience, Little Dog compares the scene to a painting that he saw in Trevor's home, focusing on the brushstrokes and alluding to the sexual meaning of stroking: "The relief 'strokes' never cohered with their shades, so that a stroke would hold two, even three colors at once. A fake. A fraud. Which was why I loved it" (113). The connection between the painting and sex is an unexpected connection to make in a scene like this, and maybe he is avoiding thinking about what is happening, as he later writes: "It was real because we didn't have to look—as if we fucked and unfucked at a distance from our bodies, yet still inside the sensation, like a memory" (114). Therefore, the more he is disconnected from the act of sex, the more he is engaged, hence the conclusion "the first time we fucked, we didn't fuck at all" (115). Little Dog is treating his relationship with Trevor as a fantasy, something he does not believe he is actually experiencing, like the porn he and Trevor have watched. Going back to the connection with his poetry, it is like he wants to find the beautiful in his intercourse with Trevor but he cannot, and he therefore thinks about what conveys beauty to him, like the painting in Trevor's home.

Just like in his poetry, Vuong's prose describes sex in a way that is both elusive and direct, not ashamed of describing sexual acts and sensations. In the following passage, Little Dog asks a series of questions to which there is no answer, and he does so by addressing his mother:

What do you call the animal that, finding the hunter, offers itself to

be eaten? A martyr? A weakling? No, a beast gaining the rare

> agency to stop. Yes, the period in the sentence—it's what makes us
> human, Ma, I swear. It lets us stop in order to keep going. (118)

Although not referencing sex directly, Vuong's image of a prey being eaten is obviously sensual and it may represent Little Dog's relationship with Trevor. This sequence, which almost feels like a dream sequence, concludes with Trevor's shame in asking Little Dog to top him, which makes him realize that "the rules, they were already inside us" (120), meaning that they could not ignore the comments that others might make about their homosexuality. Vuong concludes this section with the line, "This was also called dying" (121), hinting at Part Three of the novel. When Trevor dies, the link between sex and trauma becomes even stronger, and his death explains why Vuong had previously compared memory to a flood, as well as Trevor's confession that he is not afraid of dying anymore: sometimes, Little Dog—the narrator—looks back at his relationship with Trevor and is overwhelmed by the memories—good and bad—that are recalled in Part Two.

Language as a Metaphor: A Country is a Sentence

There are many instances where, in his novel, Vuong uses language as a metaphor to mirror his and his mother's condition. After an American napalm raid destroyed Rose's schoolhouse when she was five, she never went to school ever again, and it is the reason why she is illiterate (31). The fact that Little Dog is writing a letter to his illiterate mother is a powerful narrative technique for Vuong, because he is able to narrate in the second person, which feels like he is almost speaking to the reader. For what concerns Little Dog as a narrator and a character, the fact that his mother is illiterate allows him to confess things that he would never confess to her in person, such as his relationship with Trevor, whom Rose never met. Little Dog is writing to release himself from a burden that has lingered in his chest for a long time. But why

now? Why has he decided to confess these things to his mother just now? No mention is made of Rose's current conditions. We do not even know whether she is still alive or not, but there is a reason to speculate that she might have passed away, and that is why Little Dog finally decides to write a letter which, whether alive or not, she will never be able to read.

Since Vuong is the child of an illiterate person, the language in *On Earth* is often used as a metaphor to talk about his family's conditions, such as the following passage:

> *No object is in a constant relationship with pleasure,* wrote Barthes. *For the writer, however it is the mother tongue.* But what is the mother tongue is stunned? What is that tongue is not only the symbol of a void, but is itself a void, what is that tongue is cut out? Can one take pleasure in loss without losing oneself entirely? The Vietnamese I own is the one you gave me, the one whose diction and syntax reach only the second-grade level. (31)

Vuong tries to defend his relationship with his mother's language—Vietnamese—which he does not speak as well as he speaks English: it is not that he does not feel comfortable expressing himself in it, but he cannot afford to, in the society he lives in. As he will say later, Little Dog has to wear his English "like a mask, so that others would see my face, and therefore yours" (32), meaning so that his mother could be respected in their new society. Although Little Dog, like Vuong, speaks English better than Vietnamese, he is not letting go of his origins. Vuong will later on report another quote by Barthes: "Two languages cancel each other out, […] beckoning a third" (33), which is the language he speaks, a blending of English and Vietnamese. He then continues:

> Our mother tongue, then, is not mother at all—but an orphan, Our Vietnamese a time capsule, a mark of where your education ended, ashed. Ma, to speak in our mother tongue is to speak only partially in Vietnamese, but entirely in war. (31-32)

According to Fang, Vuong affirms that literacy and language do not define a person's intelligence, "imagination," or "critical thinking," uprooting the connotations that come with one's ability to read and write" (28). He concludes this section by promising his mother that "I'd never be wordless when you needed me to speak for you" (32), taking on the responsibility of protecting his family's dignity.

Vuong's narrative skills show from the very beginning of the book: "Let me begin again" (3), he starts, an unusual phrase to set off a novel, since, according to Aristotle's rules as we saw earlier, the beginning is something that has nothing before it. Here, instead, it is implied that the story in the book does not start with the first lines, but rather before it, when Little Dog struggles to write a letter to his mother over and over again. One might even go as far as asking whether the letter we read in the novel is the one Little Dog decides to keep or if he will throw that one away too. And if he does not, why does he not? Why is this version special compared to those he wrote earlier? We will never know. This incipit might also be symbolic of his family starting a new life in America, literally starting from nothing. A few pages later, he already explains what he intends to achieve with what he is writing: "I am writing because they told me to never start a sentence with because. But I wasn't trying to make a sentence—I was trying to break free. Because freedom, I am told, is nothing but the distance between the hunter and its prey" (4). Like many other instances in the book, Vuong is talking through Little Dog and explaining his poetic choices and why he is a writer in the first place. This passage ultimately seems to summarize his

approach to prose: he acknowledges breaking the rules by starting the last sentence of his paragraph with “because,” and then talking about freedom, maybe freedom of speech or freedom of expression. By melting his poetic style into his prose, Vuong creates his own medium through which he can communicate his feelings and talk about his own and his family’s story, which is why he became a writer in the first place.

Part Five

Why Do Poets Write Novels?

> "He don't love you. He called you a girl and he says he loved you the first time he saw you. This means he loves some idea in the world that you remind him of. There's something about you that reminds him of something he's already lost, or is missing. He don't really know you."
>
> —Carlos Dews, *Hush*

Sylvia Plath and Ocean Vuong are surely different in many ways, such as their upbringing, social background, and the time they lived, but they are interestingly similar for some aspects too: they are both children of immigrants, they both lived in New England—Plath in the outskirts of Boston, Vuong in Northampton, Massachusetts, where he currently resides—and they are both poets who decided to write a novel. Some of their literary stylistic choices are quite similar, too. For instance, they both use allusions to make a point, especially drawn from the past: while Plath's religious and historical references such as the biblical role of the fig tree or the mention of World War II help the reader set the story in a specific place and time, Vuong's metaphors are heavily inspired by mythology, especially the father-son relationship of Ulysses and Telemachus, which mirrors the relationship that the poet had with his own father. While Plath's allusions are rooted in a time in which she herself lived, meaning World War II, Vuong gives his own writing a distant dimension by using stories that were written centuries ago, maybe to convey the universality of some themes that have affected humanity for centuries. In both cases, they use these allusions to talk about their life in an elusive manner, adding to the wall of mystery between the work and the reader.

Secondly, their writings share some common themes, such as the importance of heritage, the father figure, and mental illness. According to Klapes, Plath's writing "inherited ties to

European concerns" (66) which might have been influenced by her parents' origins in the Old Continent. However, she uses history and imagery to talk about his relationship with her late father, like we saw in "Lady Lazarus" and "Daddy," where, through the repetition of some key lines and expressions, she defines her ambiguous relationship between herself and her father, constantly on the brink of war like Europe and America and in the late 1930s; while *The Bell Jar* is mostly centered around her mental illness and is only partially about her father, whom she mentions only as background information. Vuong has a similar story to Plath's: in his writing he discusses his heritage, his relationship with an absent father and his mother's mental illness. Although he and his family lived in a completely different time—one could say that *On Earth* starts with the Vietnam War, which shaped a generation of Americans that came after Plath's death—the universality of these themes make the two stories easy to sympathize with and understand. However, this time, Vuong is portraying his mother's mental illness, not his own, and his approach is therefore different from Plath's. Rose, who suffers from PTSD, does her best to bring up Little Dog in a new society where she herself does not feel like she belongs, and tries to navigate it as an outsider, hoping that her son will instead fit in. By writing in the second person, Little Dog characterizes his mother with such dignity that he ultimately achieves his goal of giving his family of outsiders a second chance in America.

Another element that makes Plath's style similar to Vuong's is both of their tendencies to use images to represent larger ideas and implicate something bigger, like Plath's fig tree and Vuong's definition of a country. In *The Bell Jar*, the fig tree represents the endless possibilities of what she might become in her life, but it also indicates her indecision in choosing just one path, which turns the fig tree, once conceived as a symbol of hope, into an oppressive entity. Plath explains the struggle her character is going through with a single image, which stands to

represent something bigger than it might suggest. Similarly, Vuong's definition of a country is one of the most poetic elements to be found in *On Earth*: a country is not merely a country, it is "a borderless sentence, a life" (8), or more than that, a life sentence. Vuong exquisitely plays with words and their meanings to explain the condition of his character, Little Dog, who promised to never be short of words to defend his family. In this case, the image of a country represents Little Dog's life in a place where he was not born, as well as his role as a queer immigrant writer in a country that is beautiful "depending on who you are" (36). Just like the "to be or not to be" in Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, some things cannot be decided, and all we can do is select the best given option between two limited possibilities.

Many contemporary authors—poets and novelists—draw inspiration from their own lives to write about it in a way that blurs the line between fiction and reality. In *Hush*, Carlos Dews tells a story that spans six decades involving several generations of women who have to deal with their fathers, husbands, and sons. Although the novel mostly follows the life of Carlos Dews—named after the author himself—from his birth to his death, by the end, the reader understands that the focus of the novel is the women, who progressively take on a more active role in their society. His three main characters—all named after him—create confusion in the reader's mind, who by the end, cannot tell them apart. The point of naming the characters in the same way is to prove that the children have the same macho attitude as their fathers. The characters' names are not the only element that resembles Dews's life: the setting—Nacogdoches County, Texas—also recalls his upbringing in the Southern United States in the 1960s and 1970s. These elements of meta-fiction and auto-fiction are what make the novel special: we almost feel like we are reading an account of Dews's life, and although some of it might be

actually inspired by his real life, certainly not all of it was—otherwise it would be considered a memoir and not a novel.

Just like Dews, Plath and Vuong are taking inspiration from their own lives and turning it into novels, but their characters are not named after themselves: rather, they are either made-up names—like Esther Greenwood—or are nameless and are only referred to by a nickname—like Vuong's Little Dog. While Carlos Dews creates a direct correlation between the author and the fictional facts, Plath and Vuong are still disguising their stories as fictional, and only the reader who knows their life story is able to make such connections. Finally, just like Vuong, Dews includes an epitaph from Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse*: "Children don't forget. Children don't forget." This affirmation, repeated twice, foreshadows the relationship between the generations of men and women that will come in succession throughout the novel. For instance, despite Mildred's hopes that her son will be better than his father—a serial cheater—her disappointment shows when she learns that Carlos Dews Junior has impregnated a five and dime store employee named Lois and will not take responsibility for it as the baby's father: "I've tried to raise Carlos better than that," she says, "and I'm gonna make sure we do the right thing for you" (122). That is when she decides to ask Lois to live with her and her late brother's Japanese wife Fusako in a house where they can raise Carlos Dews III to be a responsible human being. In *On Earth,* Vuong takes a similar decision: he will learn English and become a writer to defend his mother's and grandmother's reputations as survivors of the Vietnam War, now emigrated to America. Just like in *Hush*, Vuong stresses the bravery of the women in the story, who appear as the true heroes compared to the stereotyped male characters. As the poet himself once claimed, "I was raised by women. I was saved by women" (Fang 28).

Conclusively, although one cannot give a specific answer to why a poet might want to write a novel, I believe Plath and Vuong wanted to expand the universe of their poems by writing a novel that incorporated all of these elements: depression, ambition and the lack of a father figure for Plath; sexuality, identity and trauma for Vuong. Since their works are strongly related to their real lives, it is almost as if they wanted to give a snapshot of their existence into prose, a genre that they were not typically known for. If we were to visualize this concept, it would look like the many superhero movies that have come out in the past few years: the single spin-offs of each character would be represented by the single poems which examine certain themes, while the main movie—the one that features all the superheroes as a team—would be embodied by the format of the novel. This is why one might see all of Vuong's writings as taking place in the same "universe" or conceptual reality, like a superhero action film.

Ultimately, their prose seems so coherent to their poetic aesthetic that the two genres melt together in creating a hybrid style that goes beyond the dictionary definition of poetry and prose as it has been conceived for centuries. As mentioned in the previous chapter "Framing the Poet's Novel," James Reaney, as quoted by Rae, stated that "as poets, we've fought the novel and lost" (5). Works like *The Bell Jar* and *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* offer a counter argument to that statement: poetry can live on by blending itself with prose, creating a new genre that future readers will find interesting to read. Like Plath, who inspired generations to come, Vuong is inspiring young aspiring writers—including myself—to experiment with language, push boundaries and create the next masterpiece of that underrated subgenre that is the poet's novel.

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