
“WRIT ON WATER IN WASTE”

INGESTION AND EXCRETION IN SHARON OLDS’ *THE FATHER*

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*“When the nurses empty his catheter,
pouring the pale, amber fluid
into the hospital measuring cup, it is
neither good nor bad, it is only
the body.” – Sharon Olds, “Death and Morality”*

Elizabeth Bronfen’s *Over Her Dead Body: Death, Femininity, and the Aesthetic* poses discomfiting questions: both for its macabre subject matter, and for the possible limits of representation it bespeaks. Though Bronfen’s study deals explicitly with the female corpse, the issues she raises are generally applicable to death and its depictions. Namely, the apparent polarity between the reality of death and its representation, which seem to be mutually exclusive. In imaging art, Bronfen contends, one must choose between these evident polarities: “Do we see the real, while denying the representation or do we see the representation, thus putting the real under erasure?”¹ In aesthetic representations of death, its brute reality is elided by the language or art of its figuration; to render it is thus to “‘exteriorise’ [the] real by transferring it on to an image/signifier.”² Conversely, artless death remains unsayable, inexpressible, and insists upon its singularity, its knowability. Images of mortality thus present a tricky opposition of proximity and distance: one is either too far from or too close to the body at hand, and as soon as one term is privileged, the other is always submerged. Bronfen wonders if this binary is irreconcilably exclusionary, or if it is possible to approach aesthetically the reality of dying without absenting the body under its scrutiny.

The fraught relationship between seeing and saying is one that has long occupied the medical field, in which mortality is always close at hand. Though aestheticism seems antithetical to the antiseptic halls of a hospital ward, it is unexpectedly instantiated by Michel Foucault’s medical-clinical gaze. He limns this particular way of seeing in *The Birth of The Clinic*, in which illness is described in surprisingly aesthetic terms: “Disease is perceived fundamentally in a space of projection without depth of coincidence without development... The form in which truth is originally shown is the surface in which relief is both manifested and abolished—the portrait.”³ In order to read the inscription of illness, then, the doctor’s gaze must bracket the immediacy of human suffering and level his corporeity to a two-dimensional, visual surface. There are evident parallels between Foucault’s claim and the mimetic/figurative tension explained by Bronfen; in her explication of the clinical gaze, Laura Tanner seems to restate Bronfen’s key opposition: “In order to render the disease visible, the medical gaze must factor out the person with illness; seeing the patient as an embodied subject emerges as not only inconsequential but counterproductive.”⁴ Again, it is a question of representation: to map the patient’s illness, the medical gaze must consider the suffering body an “external fact,” while to see the human is to elide precisely the ailment the doctor intends to cure.⁵

Recent trends in medical and cultural theory have attempted to resolve this antinomy by deconstructing it, as emerging disciplines like narrative medicine aim to synthesize

observation and representation. In “The Problems of Seeing and Saying in Medicine and Poetry,” Richard Sobel and Gerda Elata locate an analogue between the kinds of problems posed by Foucault and Bronfen, as “Both physician and poet experience similar intensity the problem of seeing and saying,” of bearing witness to the world before them.⁶ In fact, the task of poetry can inform medicine by conditioning a specific kind of attention to the patient at hand; in engendering identification, rather than distance, poetry bridges the gap that intervenes to problematize both seeing and representing by opening a “space of negotiation...which is closed off by the precise discourse of medicine.”⁷ This created space is one of empathy, which translates the medical gaze into language that facilitates identification, rather than elision. Such compassion—what Jack Coulehan calls “compassionate solidarity”⁸ in his essay on suffering, poetry, and medicine—recuperates language, saving it from its inevitable fate of “losing the real...to the needs of a representational unity.”⁹ In its most intense forms, loving compassion “allow[s] for the possibility of a gaze that dissolves the distance between the two”: not only between dying patient and healthy observer, but also between death and its figurative representation.¹⁰

The paternal body at the heart of Sharon Olds’ *The Father* occupies a peculiar midpoint between the polarities outlined above. Olds’ poetry is an arguably beautiful, lyric representation of death, but at the same time, it presents illness in brutal, unflinchingly real terms. Since its publication in 1992, the 51-poem elegy has been subject to much critical scrutiny for its graphic imagery, as Kristin Lindgren explains,

Olds insists that the reader confront the concrete and often repellent physical details that accompany disease and death. Her unflinching descriptions of body fluids and bodily processes—descriptions that many readers find uncomfortable—transgress literary and cultural codes that have worked to distance and aestheticize the dying body.¹¹

Precisely this question of discomfort, and of the reactions of readers to Olds’ ground-breaking poetics, has divided critics

of her work. Lindgren insists that Olds’ imagery “demand[s] intimate engagement, not distanced assessment.”¹² Conversely, Terri Brown-Davidson contends that “emotion run amuck tends to alienate a reader,” and that Olds “has pumped up her experience to such a heightened level it no longer resembles any reality a reader wants to participate in.”¹³ These dynamic of response function on two registers: the reaction of readers to the text, but also the reaction of the speaker to her father’s dying body. Olds’ speaker may be classified as a speaker-spectator, insofar as she bears both visual and verbal witness to his illness.* Her response to her father’s death and dying shapes the conditions of our reactions as readers, which will be limned here; particularly, the fraught opposition between disgust and engagement is one to which we will return throughout this analysis.

Critics and readers alike also bristle at the blatant eroticism of *The Father*, in which Olds is a hyper-sexed Electra figure, mourning the ailing object of her erotic cathexis. In “Sentencing Eros,” Calvin Bedient calls the volume “A sequence of fifty-one poems on the poet’s ghoulish, erotic death-watch of her father, who was hospitalized for cancer, and the grieving aftermath. His dying both steps up and makes safe (unrealizable) her lust to be him and to have him.”¹⁴ Despite their vast and obvious dissimilarities, illness and eroticism are comparable in their promise of merger; as the body’s borders dissolve—psychically, as in intimacy, or physically, as in illness—their increasing permeability poise the subject for integration with another. As such, the father’s terminal illness seems to intensify incestuous desire because its corporeal effects reproduce the structures of sexual unity as an intensification of the “compassionate solidarity” invoked earlier. Though Sobel and Elata insist that “neither physician or poet peep for perverted pleasure—indeed, few sights are less erotic than a body being examined for signs of disease,” Olds’ poetry endues the medical gaze with a revelatory eroticism that creates its uncomfortable closeness.¹⁵ These terms invoke “The Lifting,” in which Olds’ father reveals his naked body to her, raising “the cotton of the gown as it / rises the way

we were promised at death it would rise, / the veils would fall from our eyes, we would know everything” (“The Lifting” 31-33). This denuding is thus epistemophilic in its unveiling, bound up with the desire to discover and know.

In combining eroticism and illness, Olds taps into an ancient element of medical care now eradicated by the stark clinicism of contemporary biomedical practice. Though Hippocratic rationalism has come to dominate the medical field, he was once rivaled by Asclepius, cult deity of dream, desire, and healing.¹⁶ In “Unforgetting Asclepius: An Erotics of Illness,” David Morris calls for the depathologization and explicit reintegration of Eros into a discipline clandestinely subtended by desire: the desire to know, to see the patient’s body. Asclepian erotics would function as the antidote to the medical gaze by registering, rather than submerging, the body; it would “reinterpret eros as a power that invokes desire (as distinct from knowledge) that credits intersubjective experience (as distinct from objective data), and that values bodily presence (as distinct from meaning).”¹⁷ If Hippocratic *logos* and Asclepian *eros* are reconfigured such that they are paired equally and oppositely, then the word may be capable of bearing commensurate witness to the desired body. As averred by proponents of narrative medicine, poetry is one of the most appropriate and effective mediums for speaking the unspeakable body, and *The Father* stages precisely this kind of reintegration, this reunion of Hippocrates and Asclepius. It is not Eros simply for the sake of shock value, but instead for assimilation and reconciliation of two surprisingly analogous experiences of embodiment.

As such, unification and integration are manifest structurally in the trope of analogy. Sharon Olds’ work is suffused with metaphor, so much so that it has been identified as one of her characteristic poetic devices.* *The Father*, despite its frank look at illness, is no exception; though her graphic renderings have a kind of directness, she does not practice the representation voice advocated by Susan Sontag in her famous “Illness as Metaphor,” which claims

that “the most truthful way of regarding illness—and the healthiest way of being ill—is the one most purified of, resistant to, metaphoric thinking.”¹⁸ As we have seen, however, poetic metaphors—when constructed carefully, specifically, and individually, as Olds’ are—actually resolve the problematic gap between seeing and saying identified by both Bronfen and Foucault. If the motion to “reassert the health of metaphor thinking” proposed by Kenneth Pitchford may be borne out, and extricated from the trite analogies endemic to medical thought, then Olds’ poetry stands in support of that recuperation and renegotiation.¹⁹ The kind of aestheticization lamented by Sontag adheres to “the standard account of epidemics,” which “are mainly of the devastating effects of disease upon character,” while Olds’ poetics assaults not character, but the body.²⁰

Not least of all, this is facilitated by “the erotic potential of *likeness*” identified by Alicia Ostriker in her study of Bishop, Olds, and Stevens.²¹ Eroticism inheres in the structure of metaphor itself, since it dissolves boundaries and distinctions; “to assert connection over difference, to want to blur rather than reify categories,” as in metaphoric figures, “is to engage in erotic discourse.”²² By pairing similar but distinct things, metaphor privileges integration of separate terms, as Roman Jakobson explains in his famous distinction between the linguistic function of combination and selection: selection, which is represented by metaphor and proper to poetry, occurs by dint of substitution made on the basis of equivalencies.²³ “Similarity connects a metaphoric term with a term for which it is substituted,” so that good metaphors do not elide the thing itself, but instead draw upon and draw out its characteristics by likening it to something that shares them.²⁴ As such, metaphor encourages an identification and near-erotic fusion, which is exaggerated and heightened by illness, in which corporeal borders are already permeable, subject to “the fragmentation of embodied identity.”²⁵

In this context, Olds’ poetry pushes merger to the point

of consumption, as one critic argues, “Olds would like to gobble life whole, to swallow the entire thrust of human experience with such gusto that no dust particle escapes her attention.”²⁶ Scholarship has paid some attention to what is incorporated, swallowed, or assimilated in *The Father*, since it is situated at the intersection of illness and desire outlined above; however, little to no work has been done to read the images of emission and ejection that appear in equal and opposite measure in Olds’ poetry. When Swiontkowski claims that “Olds learns to feast on [her father’s] body” and describes her father’s death as “food for Olds,” she neglects to attend to what is spit back up or expelled, both by Olds and by the paternal body.²⁷ Because Olds’ father suffers from esophageal cancer, he has painful difficulty swallowing and regurgitates bile and mucus, as we read in “The Glass”: “My father has to gargle, cough, / spit a mouthful of thick stuff / into the glass every ten minutes or so” (“The Glass” 7-9). Excretions seep through the pages of *The Father*, as waste products like spit, urine, sputum, and feces register the deterioration of the father’s cancerous body, and the developing identities of both father and daughter. The painful death of the speaker’s father occasions also a re-drawing of her own subjectivity, and her own corporeal limits. If there is not traceable “a plot, a linear progression” in what is sustained by Olds’ poetry, then perhaps a narrative emerges in what is sloughed off and discarded in it.²⁸

After all, the dissolution and integration of bodies occasioned by illness and erotic relations means, most fundamentally, that something is falling off. Some boundary, whether psychical or physical, has been disposed of, some skin has been shed, to afford this kind of union. In eroticism, “There is the fact that since disgust signals the violation of the borders of the self, it must be overcome by love in order for sexual intimacy to be welcome.”²⁹ In exhibiting this integration, *The Father* thus also details disintegration; the collection turns on the parataxis of ingestion and expulsion, which explores the simultaneous movements of attraction and repulsion subtending disgust. As

assimilation and incorporation, a poetics of metaphor is a poetics of consumption, and it is both a bodily and structural fact: consumption always produces waste.

We may formulate this question after the Derridean model of the “*parergon*” as proposed in “Economimesis.” In any given work—Derrida employs Kantian aesthetics as his example, crucial for its opposition to disgust—the *parergon* frames what may be included, thereby implying what is excluded. An inside always depends on a discarded outside, but Olds’ poetry confronts us with both aspects. Moreover, what is purged—explicitly, in *The Father*, implicitly in Kant’s Third Critique—is the same: “What this very work excludes, is what does not allow itself to be digested, or represented, or stated...It is an irreducible heterogeneity which cannot be eaten either sensibly or ideally, and which—this is the tautology—by never letting itself be swallowed must therefore *cause itself to be vomited*.”³⁰ As *The Father* limns this act of exclusion, even that which is not spit back up in Olds’ poems is transformed and discharged in some evocative way.

Derrida’s paradigm is complicated by the elegiac form of Olds’ collection, as “What the word *disgusting* de-nominates is what one cannot resign oneself to mourn...And if the work of mourning always consists in biting off the bit, the disgusting can only be vomited.”³¹ If mourning is accomplished by consumption, then how is mourning precluded, problematized, or revised by the images of vomit and expulsion that populate *The Father*? At the same time as substances are expelled by the characters at the level of plot, they are incorporated into the body of work as a whole, so any reading of these poems must negotiate seeming contradiction because that which seems impervious to bodily assimilation and yet has proven itself representable. Is Olds’ elegy in some way itself a by-product of consumption—an assumption which would require reworking of our understanding of waste? We must also negotiate the contrary impulses we have identified thus far: on the one hand, metaphors that dissolve

the distance between healthy and sick, lover and beloved, and on the other, the disgusting and distasteful that resist permanent incorporation and threaten to push us away.

These oppositions staged by closely reading images of the body in *The Father* enable us to register their ramifications on the body of the text at large, and its paradoxical production by waste. The contrary motions of the text limn the opposing reactions elicited by waste and leaky body matter: aversion and attraction, or what Carolyn Korsmeyer calls its “paradoxical magnetism.”³² In fact, she even allows for “a response that, no matter how unpleasant, can rivet attention to the point where one may actually be said to savor the feeling. In virtue of this savoring, this dwelling on the encounter, the emotion constitutes a singular comprehension of the value and significance of its objects.”³³ Such fascination, termed “aesthetic disgust,” is certainly at work in Olds’ poetry, as this fixation structures reader reception in such a way that it reproduces the simultaneous push-pull that inheres in regarding the ailing body.

We would be remiss to analyze such substances without engaging Julia Kristeva, whose theory of the *abject* illuminates our understanding. She defines the abject as such:

A massive and sudden emergence of uncaniness, which, familiar as it might have been in an opaque and forgotten life, now harries me as radically separate, loathsome. Not me. Not that. But not nothing, either. A ‘something’ that I do not recognize as a thing. A weight of meaninglessness, about which there is nothing insignificant, and which crushes me.³⁴

Like hair that has fallen from one’s head or fingernail clippings in the trash bin, the abject unsettles because it is recognizably familiar as having once belonged to me, or bearing similarities to me, and yet is no longer a part of me or of my kind. Something that is mine or like me is no longer a part of me, destabilizing the security of my bodily

borders and contesting my conviction in my subjectivity; the abject is not “lack of cleanliness or health...but what disturbs identity systems, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite.”³⁵ It is this same threat that subtends the emotion of disgust, as its composite terms—revulsion, abhorrence, revolt—“convey a strong sense of aversion to something perceived as dangerous because of its powers to contaminate, infect, or pollute by proximity, contact, or ingestion.”^{36*} At the same time as the abject threatens, however, it also “protects the individual...protects us because we are able to expel the abject through various means.”³⁷ As such, Kristeva employs as examples of abjection “an item of food, a piece of filth, waste, or dung,” vomit, or a corpse, all of which have purchase on the images of *The Father*.³⁸

As an “in-between,” the abject occupies a liminal position between subject and object, since it no longer belongs to the “I” but is also a “jettisoned object” that “is radically excluded and draws me to the place where meaning collapses.”³⁹ Abjection is thus the site where non-meaning collects, as Allan Lloyd-Smith explains in his reading of the abject in the post-modern, linguistic landscape. He classifies the current human situation as one of “abjection”: “the oppositional production of an antithesis to colonized and cleaned-up meaning structures.”⁴⁰ As “an affront to the symbolic system” of discourse, the abject testifies to the unsayable, something outside of language.⁴¹ Olds’ explicit terms—“I love the terms of foulness,” she proclaims in “Waste Sonata” (“Waste Sonata” 36)—certainly indulge linguistic abjection, as Suzanne Matson contends, “She disarms the words as inherited metaphors themselves, metaphors that have phallogocentrically created special ‘dirty’ vocabularies for the private use of men, or just as exclusively, clinical vocabularies for the use of controlling medical figures.”⁴² Yet they are still incorporated into the “refined” art of poetry like the “Brit Art” described in “Abjection/objectivism”—they still lend themselves to consumption.⁴³ At the same time as *The Father* sustains these categories of abjection and represen-

tation, we will soon see that it pushes back against them.

Though “the disgusting” is a classification that has expanded to contain other sensory and extra-sensory phenomena, its etymology is grounded in an understanding of oral revulsion.* As we saw in Derrida, the most literal understanding of disgusting is that which refuses incorporation, and thus must be spit back out, vomited: it is dis-taste, that which repulses taste. The father’s esophageal cancer renders hyperbolically this oral rejection, as it makes everything that passes through the mouth something hard to swallow; the irony, of course, of his cancer is that it was brought on by his alcoholism, something that could perhaps be swallowed too easily. Heavy drinking began the process of dismantling his body, of exteriorizing the interior, as “he had removed his own / liver and brain and put them on the table, small / organ of the bourbon, large organ of the chaser” (“Parent Visiting Day” 19-21) In “The Waiting,” Olds describes her father’s difficulty drinking even diluted coffee: “He tried to swallow an eighth of a teaspoon / of coffee, he would have his child to give him / the cup to spit into, his child to empty it” (“The Waiting 24-26). This image constructs a reciprocal relationship between the two, as his spit fills the cup metonymically extending Olds’ hand. His expulsion is continuous with and enables her ingestion; his lack is her fullness. In “Sharon Olds and the Taming of the Patriarch,” Gale Swiontkowski identifies this inversely related father-daughter pairing, as Olds seems to “[transform] the father-*imago* into an agent of nurture.”⁴⁴

The father-god unmakes himself in his gagging, expelling not just foreign, abject bile, but the body itself. Recalling the pain of her father’s last months in “I Wanted to Be There When My Father Died,” Olds writes, “All summer he had gagged, as if trying / to cough his whole esophagus out” (“I Wanted” 7-8). He attempts to turn his insides out, to unburden himself of the organ of his discomfort; of course, his imagined liberation from unmaking occurs at the price of his own bodily undoing, and he himself stages the assault on his body undertaken by illness. Olds’ recognizes his decom-

position as an inversion of her own, as she had once been “pummelled” and “mauled” but the brute, felt presence of his alcoholism (20, 21). Metaphor reverses Biblical creation:

I was an Eve
he took and pressed back into clay,
casual thumbs undoing the cheekbone
eyesocket rib pelvis ankle of the child
and now I watched him be undone and
someone in me gloried in it. (21-26).

The generative power is transferred from the father to Olds, whose subjectivity is reinforced by his concurrent dissolution. Decomposition and composition are thus contiguous actions, just as Olds’ figurative move makes her into a character at the same time as it disavows her substance. The prosody also registers this parataxis, for as the poem is composed, its syntax simultaneously discomposes into a litany of scattered body parts.

As the father’s capacity for consumption is compromised, his other modes of sensory access to the world are reconfigured: primarily, the distal (sight, hearing) usually privileged by Lloyd-Smith’s “colonized and cleaned-up meaning structures,” are usurped by the proximate senses of touch, smell, and taste. If “vision takes on an almost physical quality,” a tactility, then it is also worth considering the intervention of the gustatory.⁴⁵ In fact, the poem entitled “The Look” is not about vision at all, but instead initiates bodily contact, fixing upon the father’s expulsion of sputum in time with the back rub she gives him. The retrospective look of “The Present Moment” recalls, while at the same time eliding, his pre-cancerous eating habits:

I have
long forgotten the man who ate food—
not dense, earthen food, like liver, but
things like pineapple, wedges of light,
the skeiny nature of light made visible.
 (“The Present Moment” 9-13)

He had previously supplanted the gustatory sense with the distance of vision—food incorporated through sight like “wedges of light”—but his chronic reflux forces an immediate confrontation with taste. The liver stands in as synecdoche for the body racked by alcoholism, which the father cannot consume but is also no longer able to jet-tison. He is brought back to the “dense” earth in this moment, grounded in the felt immediacy of the body in the same way the thickly layered commas foreground the felt quality of the lines. In Carolyn Korsmeyer’s exegesis of what Aurel Kolnai calls “the eroticism of disgust,” she explains the intensified perceptual texture of moments of repulsion: “When one is disgusted one is almost wholly occupied with the sensory presentation or appearance of the intentional object rather than with its existential status.”⁴⁶

“The Request” intensifies and complicates the shifting sensory dynamic of illness. Sunk “down / so deep inside himself,” like the line break that buries us deeper in the poem, the father can no longer project himself outward through the sensorium (“The Request” 12). His body’s failure materializes in the liquefaction of his eyes, “his irises made of some boiled-down, viscous / satiny matter, undiscovered”; appropriate states of matter accord with proper functions, and as soon as one breaks down, the other follows. (“Wonder” 13-14). Made blind and mute by his dying, the father cannot have interactive purchase from the object world. Unable to take in or process the world at hand, he is horribly estranged from it, and yet inexorably present, becoming Kristeva’s abject corpse-in-life. As Laura Tanner contends, the ailing body both exaggerates and problematizes the threat of abjection, since “such a person often exhibits the bodily signs of impending death while yet resisting the inanimate coldness that helps us to classify the corpse as Other.”⁴⁷ In this liminal arrest, the father can neither vomit nor swallow: “the fluid stood / in the back of his throat,” stagnant as the intervening line break that halts reader progress (“The Request” 8-9). This suspension of matter persists, unchanging, from life into death, as “The Exact Moment of

his Death” reproduces this language of stasis: “We could see the fluid / risen into the back of his mouth” (“Exact Moment” 10-11). Even in its arrest, the body refuses to incorporate liquid into solidity, insisting on an inside/outside dichotomy that can no longer be maintained by the gag reflex. Readers, too, are suspended, unable to swallow easily Olds’ graphic imagery, but helpless also to refuse it.

A possible exception to the father’s compromised gustatory sense occurs in the moments that he receives the sacrament of Communion from visiting priests. This should occasion a spiritual transcendence of the material body, but, as in Olds’ other theological metaphors, the doctrine of transubstantiation is taken literally: bread, in fact, becomes body. When, in “His Terror,” “He opens his mouth for the porous disc / to be laid on the tongue,” (“His Terror” 10-11) a linguistic identity is created between the Body of Christ and the father’s sputum: “The sides of the tongue were dotted with / ovals of mucus like discs of soft ivory” (“The Last Day” 28-29). Though divergent bodily products, waste and nutrition are here tantamount, becoming, like the language of her poetry, “layered, like flesh upon bone.”⁴⁸ Later, Olds engages her father’s body in this same irreverent sacrament: “a compound disc / of sweat, I brought it off on my lips” (“His Smell” 29-30). The apparent debasement of the Eucharist further contests the kind of theological morality of body and spirit continually undercut by her poems, especially “Death and Morality” and “The Feelings.” If “the body on earth is all we got,” (“I Wanted” 15) then we are beholden to failings, bewitched by “the trance of matter” (“The Swimmer” 22). As Kristen Lindgren explains, “In *The Father* there is no religious or moral framework through which to perceive and makes sense of death; there is only the embodied self’s transmutation to pure matter.”⁴⁹ These images of gustatory ingestion neutralize the category of the divine, not by opposing it to the body, but by assimilating it. What is spit out as mucus is reincorporated by the poetic function as nutrition, generating a combinatory circle of abject, turned object, turned subject.

Sputum thus threatens to destabilize boundaries of selfhood, especially when it “dries like ivory clay from the side of his mouth” (“Death and Morality 18). The sudden solidification of matter upsets expectations, and threatens disgust, for it is the rule of repulsion that “Dry will usually be less contaminating than wet, except when the benchmark expectation is of moistness or suppleness.”⁵⁰ When the father expels mucus in “The Glass,” the eponymous receptacle remaps the surrounding space like a “solar system” (“The Glass” 32). “The old earth that used to / lie at the center of the universe,” the father’s central power, outmoded by his illness, has revealed itself to be as pretentious as the geocentric model (34-35). Instead, he “[turns] with the rest of us / around his death, bright glass of / spit on the table, these last mouthfuls,” and his abjection becomes the gravitational center of this space and of their lives (36-8). As with the Copernican Revolution, it is not that the central body itself has changed (the solar system never revolved around the earth, always the sun), but that its reality was made unavoidably present, transparent like its glass container. This resistance to discovery of the putrefaction at the core, rather than outside of, human life, is what subtends our repulsion: “Ultimately the basis for all disgust is us—that we live and die and that the process is a messy one emitting substances and odors that make us doubt ourselves and fear our neighbors.”⁵¹ As constitutive, the abject substance does not upset boundaries but only reconfigures them, creating its own solar pull.

As the father’s condition worsens, the externalization of the abject is visibly mapped on the body itself. The bodily borders—the corporeal *parergon*—that sustain stable subjectivity become permeable; even the epidermal boundary is disposable, as “Every hour, now, he is changing, / shedding some new ability” (“The Pulling” 1-2). As his bodily fluids dry up, solidify, the body itself liquefies: where “his solid ruddy stomach had been” there are now “loose / soft hairy rippled folds / lying in a pool of folds” (“The Lifting” 8-10). As the abject is traditionally female-gendered, the fa-

ther is feminized by his disintegration, nested within labial folds of skin; soon after, Olds explicitly identifies his physical similarity to her and her daughter. Swiontkowski cites this imagistic trans-gendering as an exchange of power, for “In feminizing her father-imago, Olds in run assumes for herself certain masculine qualities of will, ambition, and self-realization.”⁵² More than a figurative imposition from the outside in, however, this poem, collapsing in upon itself through repetition, testifies to the body’s revolt against itself from the inside out. As the cancer proliferates through division, the body tries but fails to rid itself of dead cells, which cluster in tumors protruding from, but not rupturing, the skin’s surface. As William Ian Miller writes in *The Anatomy of Disgust*, “If skin cover[s] the disgusting matter inside, the festering inside might write itself large upon the skin, desecrating it by erupting to the surface.”⁵³ This violently failed disposal texturally inscribes the father, on whom “you can see some of the larger lumps / pressing out at his throat and chest, / he is like a stocking stuffed with things” (“The Picture I Want” 6-8). Through this simile, the father’s body is turned into an inanimate vessel, pressured to bursting by an internal force both self and not-self. The blood transfusions to keep him alive continue this process of internal alienation, for “They have drained / the blood out of his body and replaced it / with fresh blood from the people of Redwood City” (“The Lumens” 6-8).

At the same time as abject fluids are discarded and cordoned off, then, they are also invited back into the body. Through our own act of incorporation, which marries the merger and consumption inexorably present both literally and stylistically in Olds’ poems, we are able to expand upon Kristeva’s understanding of the abject by making ingestion and expulsion two sides of the same coin. As we saw in “The Glass,” any belief in a rigid inside/outside distinction is always a fiction. In truth, “Social and cognitive structures create dirt less by assigning something to play that role than as a consequence of categorization itself.”⁵⁴ Borders are always already permeable and porous, and situa-

tions like illness and desire simply make these conditions visible, precisely by subordinating vision to the proximate senses. When understood in this light, the give-and-take created by these equal and opposite functions does not engender inequality, in which the body must be possessed or a held onto, but rather constructs a cyclical space of reciprocity that welcomes permeation and disintegration. In this way, Olds eventually, though gradually, accustoms herself to cremation as the proper method of disposal for her father's body. The idea originally repulses her because she considers it flagrant disrespect for the integrity of the body, informed by the material spirituality limned by earlier poems on the Eucharist: "I hated / the way we were treating him like garbage, we would burn him, as if / only the soul mattered," she laments ("The Dead Body" 8-10). Cremation instantiates Kristen Lindgren's claim that "While depicting his body in fragments, however, the daughter resists the actual fragmentation of his body," citing "The Dead Body" as proof positive:⁵⁵

I wanted this man
burned whole, don't
let me see that arm on anyone in
Redwood City tomorrow, don't take that
tongue in transplant or that unwilling eye.
("The Dead Body" 17-19)

If cremation disintegrates the body, then she wants this disintegration to be at once complete, integrate, to save it from enacting the partial abjection wreaked upon the body by illness. "This man" instead remains wholly subject, even as he is turned into objectified subject. Olds clings to the incorruptible virtue of the cremated body, belied by the fractured, convoluted syntax:

I am glad we burned my father before
the bloom of mold could grow from him,
maybe it had begun in his bowels but we burned his bowels,
cleansing them with fire.
("The Mortal One" 7-10)

The crematory fire neutralizes the body's ability to produce the abject, to empty itself and proliferate like its cancerous tumors. When she holds his urn, she focuses on the material weight of its containment, "the smooth, square box...soldered up," which she wants to assume into herself ("The Urn" 5, 7). She is going to swallow him, like people "swallow / whole cars," swallow without masticating to maintain the coherence of the urn, and the blessed "pressure of [its] weight" that has come to metonymize his body (13-14, 25). Here, she exhibits the greed earlier pilloried by Terri Brown-Davidson, as the voice of the poet who "like Kronos...would like to gobble life whole."⁵⁶

However, "The Urn" is immediately followed by "His Ashes," a titular shift that supplants the illusion of wholeness with the fragmentation at its center. As Olds cradles the urn, its weight evokes an image of expulsion, when the father urinated, "got the fluid out crackling / and sputtering like a wet fire" ("His Ashes" 9-10). Despite the urn's containment, the father's body leaks, both physically and imaginatively, from the narrative space accorded it. Olds attempts to reconstruct him imaginatively from his pieces; she converts "the jumble / of shards," shattered as the line break, to "a bone of his wrist...the elegant knee he bent...his jaw...his skull that at birth was / flexible yet" (33-34, 35-38). This recuperation of his image remains only hypothetical, couched in interrogative constructions that cannot be grounded in material confirmation. Her musings are punctuated by a dash, which interrupts his reintegration and returns and reconciles her to the ephemerality of his now-dissolute substance: "bone and the ash it lay in, silvery / white as the shimmering coils of dust / the earth leaves behind it" (39-41).

When she visits her father's grave a year after his death, she accepts the previously repulsive mold clinging to the surface of his headstone. She incorporates abjection—thereby voiding the term—into the material and poetic texture of "One Year," when "the first dots of lichen were appearing /

like stars in early evening” (“One Year” 20-21). Again, she is overcome by a desire to ingest his being: “When I kissed his stone it was not enough / when I licked it my tongued went dry a moment, I / ate his dust, I tasted my dirt host” (38-40). This time, however, she accepts it in disperse form, and she sacrifices something of herself in the process; the fluid of her mouth is lost to the gravestone, and the self is dependent on this digestion, just as the subject “I” depends syntactically on the line buried beneath. Following this exchange, her identification with her father mounts, and she declares in “The Swimmer,” “I am like those elements my father turned into, / smoke, bone, salt” (“The Swimmer” 16-17). The line break actualizes this material transformation staged by the simile, as they become alike in their sublimation from solid body to residual vapor. Presenting herself as a swimmer, Olds here has adopted the earlier image of her father as “a Channel Swimmer,” though she no longer feels the prohibition against touching him, and has in fact absorbed him (“The Present Moment” 28). As such, he seems more troublingly abject in life, while in death, he actually reaffirms and strengthens her subjectivity.

When she goes in for a breast exam, the procedure confirms their likeness and even enables her to inhabit her father’s body through its failing:

I feel like my father in the hospital bed
.....
I don’t know when he found the lump,
rising above his clavicle. But when I
go down and get ready to die,
prepare to find a sphere hard as a
pea-seed buried in my breast,
I can feel myself
slip into my father.
 (“The Exam” 2, 7-13)

Her corporeality has begun now to reproduce the obtrusions of his. In mirroring the abject—submitting it to identificatory assimilation through its poetic restaging—

she has purged it of its horrifying unfamiliarity. She is at home in his body, not troubled by the “uncanniness” (literally, “un-homely-ness”) identified by Kristeva; not “radically separate,”⁵⁷ she is instead joined with him “wholly, deep inside of,” inhabiting, “his flesh” (“The Exam” 14).

So far we have illustrated the work of mourning, of “biting off the bit,” so deeply troubling to Derrida as anathema to the disgusting.⁵⁸ Derrida’s assertion is obviously informed by the Freudian paradigm explicated in “Mourning and Melancholia,” though he refers specifically to mourning’s extreme variant, melancholia, in which “The ego wants to incorporate this object into itself, and, in accordance with the oral or cannibalistic phase of libidinal development in which it is, it wants to do so by devouring it.”⁵⁹ To be true, *The Father* exhibits this extremity of consumption, but to claim that this is all Olds does is as myopic as arguing that her poetry swallows life whole without expulsion. If the body of her work is a digestive one, as I have argued, then it is both a biological and poetic fact that something must be discharged. This contiguity of consumption and excretion actually inheres, despite Derrida’s reticence to the fact, in the gradual structure of mourning, by which “each single one of the memories and expectations in which the libido is bound to the object is brought up and hyper-catheted, and detachment of the libido is accomplished in respect of it.”⁶⁰ The self does absorb attributes from the loved object, but it does so in order to decathet them, to let them go.

Olds completes this work of mourning in “To My Father,” which finds her “hip-deep” in a pond, where she writes,

I peed,
I looked down my naked body,
greenish with maple shade, and saw
the pee curl, oily and amber, in the
pewter spring-born water. Bourbon
down to icy crystal—I am with you.
 (“To My Father” 3-8)

What Olds has assimilated of her father, she here discharges—not through the forcible removal of vomit, but through the natural phase transition of urination. Metaphor converts urine, “oily and amber,” to “bourbon,” thereby returning it to her father’s body. The corporeal system of excrement literalizes the process of decathexis, finally successful. She invokes her father apart from her self, reading his substance on the mercurial surface of the water and subsequently declaring herself separate: “I have seen your gorgeous name / writ on water in waste, and pulled to the / dam and dashed over it” (24-26). This moment saves Olds from descending into hysterical melancholia, which is facilitated by unrelenting narcissistic identification.⁶¹

The Father, too, is “writ on water in waste,” in the language of abjectivism parsed by Lloyd-Smith. If “abject and abjection are my safe-guards. The primers of my culture,” which enable artistic production precisely through their exclusion by the parergon, then Olds’ poetry foregrounds the disgusting that usually only implicitly subtends everyday life.⁶² Olds presents another model of poetic creation, one that does not depend upon the elision of the abject body (this is, fundamentally, what is at stake in Bronfen’s analysis), but which instead presents the body in all of its stinking putrefaction; the “healthy metaphors” solicited by Richard Pitchford in fact appear to be the unhealthiest of all. Like the “waste foetuses” that move through the father in “Waste Sonata,” waste has a paradoxically generative power; the act of decomposition is actually an act of composition (“Waste Sonata” 46). Though the disgusting is most commonly associated with death, life, too, inheres in it, as “Disgusting objects are those that endure the cycle of birth, growth, and death, after which they disintegrate and provide the material that generates and supports other life forms.”⁶³ Writing in the stinking ink of blood, sweat, and bile, Olds explodes the aesthetic parergon, neutralizing precisely the border between inside and outside that mobilizes our re-

vulsion towards what is excluded from our bodies and our cultures. As such, she makes room for the contradictory and ambivalent responses of readers to her poetry, uncomfortable detachment and incorporative engagement, since the boundary that effects them is only illusory, and may be manipulated at will. The Father thus neglects the process of sublimation—both in the psychoanalytic sense of redirecting impulses to higher pathways and in the scientific sense of a phase transition from palpable solid to invisible gas—as waste is materially present throughout the elegiac trajectory of Olds’ work. Like the familial cosmos depicted in “The Glass,” Olds’ constellation of poetry turns about the material stuff at the core of being; to believe we can vomit it up cleanly, without consequence, is simply benighted objectification of our own corporeity.

ENDNOTES

- 1 Elizabeth Bronfen, “Violence of Representation—Representation of Violence,” in *Over Her Dead Body: Death, Femininity, and the Aesthetic* (New York: Routledge: 39 – 56, 1992), 51.
- 2 Bronfen, 46.
- 3 Michel Foucault, *The Birth of the Clinic*, trans. A.M. Sheridan (London: Routledge, 1973). 6.
- 4 Laura Tanner, “Death-Watch: Terminal Illness and the Gaze in Sharon Olds’ *The Father*,” *Mosaic* (29.1: 103 – 121, March 1996), 105.
- 5 Foucault, 8.
- 6 Richard Sobel and Gerda Elata, “The Problems of Seeing and Saying in Medicine and Poetry,” *Perspectives in Biology and Medicine* (44.1: 87 – 98, Winter 2001), 89.
- 7 *Ibid.*
- 8 Jack Coulehan, “Compassionate Solidarity: Suffering,” *Perspectives in Biology and Medicine* (52.4: 585 – 603, Autumn 2009), 586.

- 9 Bronfen, 45
- 10 Tanner, 104.
- 11 Kristin Lindgren, "Birthing Death: Sharon Olds's The Father and the Poetics of the Body," *Teaching Literature and Medicine*, eds. Anne Hunsaker Hawkins and Marilyn Chandler McEntyre (New York: Modern Language Association: 260 – 266, 2000), 260.
- 12 Ibid., 261.
- 13 Terri Brown-Davidson, "The Belabored Scene, the Subtlest Detail: How Craft Affects Heat in the Poetry of Sharon Olds and Sandra McPherson," *Hollins Critic* (29.1: 1 – 10, February 1992), 2.
- 14 Calvin Bedient, "Sentencing Eros," *Salmagundi* (97: 169 – 181, Winter 1993), 169.
- 15 Sobel and Elata, 90.
- 16 David B. Morris, "Un-Forgetting Asclepius: An Erotics of Illness," *New Literary History* (38.3: 419 – 441, Summer 2007), 424.
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- 19 Kenneth Pitchford, "Metaphor as Illness: A Meditation on Recent Poetry," *New England Review* (1.1: 96 – 119, Autumn 1978), 98.
- 20 Sontag, 40.
- 21 Alice Ostriker, "I am (Not) this: Erotic Discourse in Bishop, Olds, and Stevens," *The Wallace Stevens Journal* (19.2: 234 – 254, 1995), 237.
- 22 Ibid., 253
- 23 Jakobson, "Two Aspects of Language and Two Types of Aphasic Disturbances," *On Language*, ed. Linda Waugh (New York: The Roman Jakobson and Krystyna Pomorska Jakobson Foundation, Inc.: 115 – 133, 1990), 119.
- 24 Ibid., 132.
- 25 Tanner, 114.
- 26 Brown-Davidson, 2.
- 27 Gale Swiontkowski, "Sharon Olds and the Taming of the Patriarch," *Imagining Incest: Sexton, Plath, Rich, and Olds on Life with Daddy*, (Cranbury, NJ: Associated University Presses: 109 – 137, 2003), 125, 129.
- 28 Brian Dillon, 'Never having had you, I cannot let you go': Sharon Olds' poems of a father-daughter relationship," *The Literary Review* (37.1: 108 – 119, Fall 1993), 108.
- 29 Carolyn Korsmeyer, *Savoring Disgust: The Foul and Fair in Aesthetics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press: 2011), 33.
- 30 Derrida, "Economimesis," *Diacritics* (11: 3 – 25, June 1981), 21.
- 31 Ibid., 23.
- 32 Korsmeyer 3.
- 33 Ibid.
- 34 Julia Kristeva, "Approaching Abjection," *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press: 1982), 2.
- 35 Ibid., 4.
- 36 William Ian Miller, *The Anatomy of Disgust* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press: 1997), 2.

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- 37 Rina Arya, *Abjection and Representation: An Exploration of Abjection in the Visual Arts, Film and Literature* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 2.
- 38 Kristeva, 2.
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- 41 Ibid., 194.
- 42 Suzanne Matson, "Talking to Our Father: The Political and Mythical Appropriations of Adrienne Rich and Sharon Olds," *The American Poetry Review* (18.6: 35 – 41, November/December 1989), 40.
- 43 Lloyd-Smith, 195 – 196.
- 44 Swiontkowski, 127.
- 45 Tanner, 121.
- 46 Korsmeyer, 37.
- 47 Tanner, 107.
- 48 Brown-Davidson, 3.
- 49 Lindgren, 265.
- 50 Miller, 39.
- 51 Ibid., xiv.
- 52 Swiontkowski, 111.
- 53 Miller, 52.
- 54 Ibid., 44.
- 55 Lindgren, 264.

56 Brown-Davidson, 2.

57 Kristeva, 2.

58 Derrida, 23.

59 Freud, "Mourning and Melancholia," *The Standard Edition of the Complete Works of Sigmund Freud*, trans. James Strachey (London: The Hogarth Press: 1916), 249 – 50.

60 Ibid., 245.

61 Ibid., 249.

62 Kristeva, 2.

63 Korsmeyer, 34.

* AUTHOR'S NOTES

All internal citations refer to poems in Sharon Olds's *The Father*. Sharon Olds, *The Father* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1992).

- *p69 At the risk of committing the insidious misdeed of conflating poet and speaker, I will from now on refer to the speaker of *The Father* as "Olds." As this volume is confirmed to be autobiographical, most scholarship on it has done the same thing.
- *p70 In "Talking to Our Father: The Political and Mythical Appropriations of Adrienne Rich and Sharon Olds," Suzanne Matson cites "dramatically prolific and unapologetic as a crucial means of empowering the self" in Sharon Olds' poetry (Matson 40). Moreover, in Alicia Ostriker's "I am (Not) this: Erotic Discourse in Bishop, Olds, and Stevens" engages metaphor as one of the most outstanding devices in her poetry.
- *p72 For a more thorough understanding of the overlap and disparity between the categories of the abject and the disgusting, consult Chapter 1 of Rina Arya's book *Abjection and Representation: An Exploration of Abjection in the Visual Arts, Film and Literature*. Here, they will be considered as roughly synonymous.
- *p73 The word "disgust" combines the privative prefix "dis" with "gusto," or "taste" (from the OED). For more information on and an expansion of the term, see Chapter 1 of William Ian Miller's *The Anatomy of Disgust*, "Darwin's Disgust."