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# Constructions of Female Identities in Mary Gordon's *The Other Side* and Maureen Howard's *Before My Time*

Neli Gogovska

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CONSTRUCTIONS OF FEMALE IDENTITIES  
IN MARY GORDON'S *THE OTHER SIDE*  
AND MAUREEN HOWARD'S *BEFORE MY TIME*

by

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Bachelor of Arts, University of Veliko Turnovo, 1992  
Master of Arts, University of Veliko Turnovo, 1993

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty

of the

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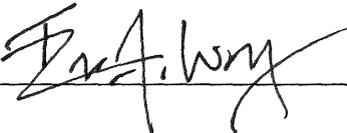
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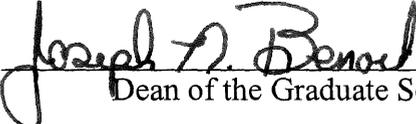
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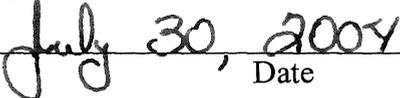
  
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## ABSTRACT

In *Women's Time* Kristeva designates three broad currents of feminist struggle: first, the suffragist movement declaring a universalist view of women's experience regardless of class, age, and cultures; second, the phase of difference, that she regards as "returning to an archaic (mythic) memory as well as cyclical or monumental temporality of marginal movements" (355); and third, a trend that she wholeheartedly supports for their concept that "the dichotomy of man and woman as an opposition of two rival entities is a problem of metaphysics" (366).

This thesis discusses Howard and Gordon as proponents of the second phase because they write the post-immigrant experience of a group of women identified by their Irish origin and the influence of the Catholic church which, on the one hand, positions them in an ethnic niche within mainstream American culture but on the other hand, works towards presenting this experience as typical for the integration of immigrant families in big cities. In their novels Howard and Gordon attempt to write the experience of the Irish American women reclaiming their matrilineal past; while *Before My Time* posits the question of what a woman's individual project could be in relation to other women, apart from her socially prescribed roles as homemaker, mother, and professional, *The Other Side* provides a possible answer to this question in writing a family history through the perspective of women but without excluding men's viewpoint. In this way they establish

themselves as writers following the guidelines of second wave feminism concerned with the specificity of women's experiences and their expression through images of the female body as well as a reading of the mother that if tailored on the public image of the Virgin Mary endorsed by patriarchy, proves unsatisfactory. The writers, however, though not launching their explorations beyond the heterosexual matrix, seem to agree with Kristeva's point about the positionality of femininity and masculinity and try to transgress their boundaries by depicting characters that share these characteristics.

## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

In her 1991 essay “‘I Can’t Stand Your Books’: A Writer Goes Home,” Mary Gordon discusses the problem of Irish American eloquence compared to that of other marginalized ethnic groups such as the American Jews and blacks. It would be difficult, she argues, to teach a course in Irish American Literature for there are hardly over half a dozen writers who can be considered Irish American. Gordon names O’Neill and Fitzgerald with certain stipulations, James T. Farrell, J.F Powers, William Alfred, Elizabeth Cullinan, Maureen Howard, and William Kennedy. She claims that Irish Americans are conspicuously silent in the literary field because “All these factors – linguistic colonization occurring at the same time as a preservation of national identity, a self defined in highly local terms, the creation of parallel worlds – are some reasons why there have been so few Irish American writers” (Gordon 205). When it comes to women writers, she suggests, the circle becomes even narrower. As if in response to her passionate criticism, an anthology of Irish American women’s fiction was published six years later. Its editor, Caledonia Kearns, selected readings from two dozen twentieth century writers working since the 30s. Two among them, Maureen Howard and Mary Gordon, are award-winning authors representative of contemporary Irish American fiction. To put it in Howard’s own words, Mary Gordon, together with Alice Fulton and

Tess Gallagher, belongs to a group that portray women who “yearn to cross boundaries that will project them beyond the prescription of dailiness” (xii). These boundaries for Howard are closely connected with the theme of departure – literal, that refers to emigration from Ireland, and figurative, that marks the abandoning of an old lifestyle for a new. In her novels Howard is mainly concerned with the tension that her characters experience in their transition to a new phase or a crucial turn in their lives. Howard is much acclaimed for her prose that is “bolder, more ironic than incantatory” (Kearns xx) and for her persistent interest in the challenges that contemporary Irish women encounter.

Maureen Howard and Mary Gordon inhabit a tradition that doesn't seem to produce Irish American fiction writers per se. To place these two writers mechanically into a context defined by Graham Green, Evelyn Waugh, Flannery O'Connor, Katherine Ann Porter, Mary McCarthy, and Carson McCullers will be rather ambiguous; on the one hand, what all of them broadly share is a spirit of going “against the grain,” of exposing social evils, but on the other, they are so diverse in their themes, concerns, and experiences that they can hardly belong to the same trend. There are authors whose names are Irish or who are defined as Catholic and whose number is far from great. Many critics consider Mary Gordon a Catholic writer probably because her books are concerned with issues such as maternity, faith, guilt, compassion; at the same time she explores the limitations that a Catholic background imposes on female artists or professionals, the burden of childcare, the uneasy relationships between daughters and mothers. Her work is characterized by exquisiteness and precision of style, charged with emotion and subtle humor, and predominantly oriented toward female experience.

Maureen Howard, however, is even more difficult to place. *Before My Time* deals with the female protagonist's search for a self and coming to terms with a past that is more American than Irish; still, most of the characters recognize their Irish immigrant background. It will be impossible to discuss Irish Americanness and the two novels as immigration narratives without taking into consideration some historical facts about the Irish in America, and Irish women in particular.

Is there an Irish or Catholic tradition in American literature? Who qualifies as an Irish American writer? Somebody who writes exclusively about the Irish in America? Charles Fanning provides answers to these questions in *The Irish Voice in America: 250 Years of Irish American Fiction*. So far this is the most thorough and complete research of the writers of Irish America who recognize writing the experience and the changing image of their fellow Irish as a major task. Fanning excludes from his book authors of Irish origin, like Flannery O'Connor, who are not concerned with ethnic themes or American writers who depict Irish characters but do not belong to the diaspora. He enumerates several topics and issues that pervade Irish American texts which he broadly divides into two cycles, chronologically encompassing the two previous centuries.

The twentieth-century fiction echoes the nineteenth in a number of ways: the dominant mother in her fortress house; the first son marching off to the priesthood; the convent-educated daughter playing the piano in the parlor; parochial schoolmates turning into leaders of the Young Men's Sodality or incorrigible criminals; lives affected by extremes of dissipation, abstinence, profligacy, and piety; lives organized around ideas of religion,

family, nationhood for Ireland, hard work, homeownership, the rise to respectability; tableaux of rituals gathering at deathbeds and christenings, weddings and wakes; the gift of humor and invective in public speech joined to an inability to express love and compassion in private; a penchant stylistically for formal experimentation, linguistic exuberance, and satiric modes. (Fanning 3)

Within all this thematic variety, Fanning positions Gordon's texts as novels of domesticity with cheerless, satirical undertones. He praises Howard for preserving the positive outlook of contemporary Irish-American fiction and for her "adventurous, exuberant style." There are, however, more tangential points between the two writers than Fanning allows. The setting in their novels is always an East coast city, often New York, with its diversity of cultures, ethnicities, religions, and fashions. To write about an exclusively Irish experience is an almost impossible task because experiences differ; to make it central to the novel is a possibility though, especially if characterized by issues and concerns such as the strong self-willed woman, the importance of a home, a turn to the past, frustration to communicate love and appreciation in the family, strenuous relations between mothers and daughters.

Both writers, although recognizing their Irish American origin, define themselves as "women writers" first and foremost. In a lengthy interview with Alma Bennett, Mary Gordon shares her vision about her formative influences, "I think gender is important to me. I think it because I think I'm still read in a gendered way that, in all honesty, I have to call myself a 'woman writer.' I won't call myself 'a Catholic writer.' That's too limiting.

[...] I don't think it was how I was formed. But I do feel I was formed as a writer by my femaleness" (Gordon 133). A review in *Contemporary Literary Criticism*, vol. 151, labels Maureen Howard likewise, "Howard has been referred to by some critics as a "woman's writer" due to her recurring focus on female characters, both central and minor" (260). Howard pinpoints her position as a writer, and respectively, the goals of women writers in the Foreword of *Cabbage and Bones: An Anthology of Irish American Women's Fiction*, "I note that the subtitle of this collection bears no hyphen, for though the writers are more or less Irish, more or less American, they write, as all fair writers do, of an experience that is at once universal and particular" (xiv).

*Before My Time* by Maureen Howard and *The Other Side* by Mary Gordon epitomize the concerns of female experience in a post-immigrant society that, however, still keeps the memory of origin. While *Before My Time* is a tale of second and third generation Irish Americans searching for their personal fulfillment and happiness, *The Other Side* is an epic of endurance and struggle for survival for five generations. Its focus is on women who are the driving force of the novel.

The two texts under discussion feature characters distinctly belonging to an Irish America. Their Irishness, though, is not overtly exposed through maintaining particular rites, celebrating particular holidays, or getting involved in politics with a nationalistic hue, but is implied through writing the histories of two Irish immigrant families, the MacNamaras and the Cogan-Murray-Quinns. By writing these histories mainly from a woman's viewpoint, Howard and Gordon not only make the Irish American woman the speaking subject but also allow her to turn to her roots and reclaim her past through the

experience of the mother, rather than of the father. The two novels can be read in many different ways: as narratives of spiritual exile and immigration and tales about uplifting younger generations. The search for a self, for becoming the subject in process is crucial for the female characters who define themselves through denying the mother and all the stifling oppressiveness she stands for. They are groundbreaking for the patriarchal myths of the loving, renunciative Catholic mother and the drinking father. Here the drunks are the mothers, Millicent and Magdalene, who also are weak and rebellious daughters. To tear the myths further, the texts tell the stories of tough women and congenial men.

For both Howard and Gordon remembering the past is another main theme in their novels. It is depicted as an uneasy process, full of tension, guilt, and self-reproach that influences the characters' attitudes and decisions. The evaluation of the past especially on the part of the female characters is colored by their Catholicism, though the main protagonists do not identify themselves solely as Catholic and Irish but more so as emancipated women. They are moral beings, even when they violate moral norms. The protagonists are judgmental but are their own severest critics, too. The ages of patriarchs and matriarchs are over. Later generations identify themselves as Americans, despite their Irish names. Relations in the family are tense and strained if determined by blood but reinforced if based on vibrant intellectual compatibility and compassion.

Howard and Gordon represent two focal points in the Irish experience: search of self and coming to terms with the haunting ghost of the past. The female characters are torn between their duties to the family and the pursuit of their personal happiness.

I interpret the works of Maureen Howard and Mary Gordon as a project to write the experience of the Irish American women in New England from a feminist perspective of which they are conscious. Howard's *Before My Time*, first published in 1971, after the turbulent 60s, posits in Laura one of the main questions that female intellectuals of the time were facing: What is my project as a woman and a thinker? Mary Gordon's *The Other Side* that appeared in 1989 presents one possible answer to this question by writing a history of the Irish woman in America. Thus they set the contours of a phase representative of feminist thinking in the 70s and the 80s of the twentieth century that allows for the Irish American woman to voice her experience. Theirs is a type of feminism that springs from the second wave and is based on difference, following the mainstream heterosexual matrix and, simultaneously trying to stretch the boundaries of the feminine/masculine dichotomy and destabilize its rigidity. In my attempt to disclose the way they relocate and reinscribe female identities and especially mother-daughter relations I am greatly influenced by Julia Kristeva's analysis of the abject mother, although I will not use it in a purely psychoanalytical way but more as a mechanism of establishing an identity in opposing the Other. For the interpretation of her work I am very indebted to Toril Moi and Kelly Oliver whose viewpoints helped me develop this project.

In *Powers of Horror* Kristeva defines the abject as "a border; abjection is above all ambiguity. Because, while releasing a hold, it does not radically cut off the subject from what threatens it – on the contrary, abjection acknowledges it to be in perpetual danger" (9). For Mary Gordon abjection could be her Irishness. On the one hand, many

critics define her as an Irish American writer; on the other, she distances herself from her origin. In an interview with Annie Lally Milhaven she says, "I'm writing a novel about Irish immigrants. I've thought a lot about the Irish. I'm reading about their history and thinking a lot about them. I love and I feel very drawn to them. At the same time I find them appalling at some levels, particularly in America. So I have a real love/hate for them" (49). This seems to me to be Gordon's abjection of her Irishness that makes it possible for her by denying it to reclaim it in her writing. She distances herself from Irish Americans by using third person singular: it is "the Irish," not "we Irish", yet making the theme of an Irish experience central to the novel doubtlessly positions her among Irish American writers. Her rejection of a self-sacrificial Irishness, unable to embrace unconditional happiness, is voiced by one of the few non-Irish characters in *The Other Side*, Sister Otile, "You know what your problem is, Camille. You like the idea of a thing better than the thing itself. You like standing for something better than being something" (Gordon 380). Howard expresses a similar position through Laura, the Yankee-Irish, in *Before My Time*, "I want to stop loving Irishmen ... who want the world to be different. Never my world or my ... mine" (Howard 226). Although in this way Howard questions her Irish legacy, she has no doubt about where she belongs. In her case the abjection might be the fear of losing the past in order to recreate it, or, as she puts it through Laura, "How sour I was when I first lost the sense of my world to my children, the message ... oh, that something can be done, that it can be all rebuilt stone by stone" (Howard 239). Howard proclaims the death of the "good girl" later on the same page, which can be read as denying the self in order to embrace it.

In both texts the main female protagonists, Laura and Ellen, are described as advocates of a change towards a life that makes them able to express their vision of a woman's active role in society. While Ellen represents an interest in politics characteristic for first wave feminism in America, Laura revolts against women's inscription into public office that forces them into complying with the prescriptions of a man-made business world, a threat noticed by some second wave feminists. Both heroines are crucified between the immediate demands of family and public life on the one hand and the present and the past on the other, thus finding themselves in an "in-between" space, similar to what Homi Bhabha calls a "*time-lag* – a contingent moment – in the signification of closure" (Bhabha 449) or a site that those who are marginalized or silenced inhabit temporarily before embracing their new identities. In a broader perspective, such a space is the overlapping of what Bhabha identifies as "relocation" and "reinscription", the terms that point to the process of transformation of a set of ideological concepts into a new discursive interpretation, marked by a state of "in-betweenness" or a "time lag" (Bhabha 450).

For the purposes of my interpretation of *Before My Time* and *The Other Side*, relocation and reinscription mark the process of de-centering of the masculine/feminine dyad which is realized in these texts by endowing the female characters with traditional "masculine" qualities like strong will, aggressiveness, persuasion, while depicting the male characters as kind, patient, and calm that are stereotypical "feminine" traits. My reading of Howard and Gordon is that they write from a feminist position, generally attributed to second wave feminism, that tries to break away from the assumption that

woman is equated to mother and marginalized, by creating texts in which women are centrally positioned, and moreover, belonging to a particular ethnic group (doubly marginalized), and problematize the mother-daughter relations between them, while leaving the mother-son relations marginal. Kristeva's *Stabat Mater* comes as a most relevant point of departure because in it she makes a powerful claim that institutional Christianity on the whole, and its Catholic branch in particular, have reduced femininity to motherhood. She shows how, through art and dogma, Catholicism instills in western civilization the idea of the mother "as the limit of the symbolic order", to use Moi's phrase, so that she does not present a threat to it but is subjugated and subsumed by it. "Symbolic order" is Jacques Lacan's coinage that designates the second stage of an infant's psychological development when it realizes itself as separated from the (m)other and enters patriarchal social codes obviated by language. The first stage is the one of the "Imaginary order" which is non-verbal, dominated by the mother and characterized as a pre-oedipal space of bodily drives and rhythms that are linked with the unconscious. The transition from the Imaginary to the Symbolic order inevitably constrains the expression of feelings and experience through patriarchal discourse that promotes categorizations and rigid grammar. The connection of the infant with the mother is interrupted and subjected by the Law of the Father. Oliver provides a similar interpretation of the way Kristeva exposes this marginalization of the mother by Catholicism in *Reading Kristeva: Unravelling the Double-bind* and how it is problematic for women today,

Kristeva argues that the traditional religious accounts of motherhood, particularly the myth of the Virgin Mary, can no longer explain, interpret,

give meaning to, motherhood. What she describes as the “cult of the Virgin” has been used by Western patriarchy in order to cover up the unsettling aspects of maternity and the mother-child relationship (1976a). The cult of the Virgin controls maternity and mothers by doing violence to them. Like sacrifice, the cult of the Virgin contains the violence of semiotic drives by turning violence against them. The Virgin’s only pleasure is her child who is not hers alone but everyone’s, while her silent sorrow is hers alone. Kristeva maintains that the image of the Virgin covers over the tension between the maternal and the Symbolic. (50)

Howard and Gordon show that the child is not a woman’s only pleasure, especially if the child is a daughter, and that the world of a contemporary woman does not consist only of motherhood. It is not even divided simply into private and public, but into private, personal, and public, in which the personal and the public might be conflicting entities, especially when the public intrudes in a coercive way, as Maureen Howard puts it in *Before My Time*,

“You signed a contract for the book.” His voice thickened in his throat, near to rage. “It was a *good* idea.”

“It was another public idea.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

I said: “That we always do public works.”

“Yes?”

“And I want to do something personal this time.”

“You have the children. You have me...”

“This is our private life,” I cried.

“That’s boring for the best of us, isn’t it?” Harry asked with a little smile.

“No –”

“Well, what the hell is it then? Private and personal – the distinctions are too fine for me. Your book is worthwhile: it matters. You were going to Washington next week.”

“I cancelled. Another public cause. It’s ineffectual ... oh, let me be.”

(89)

Here the *public* overlaps with what Lacan calls the Symbolic order, or culture in general, with all its institutions, that oppresses women; the *private* refers to the space reserved for the family and the woman’s position in it; and the *personal* is the vaguest of the three categories, obviously aiming at a woman’s creative power and fulfillment. From such a viewpoint the mother-child relationship occupies only a part of a woman’s realization as a social being and instead of pleasure, or *jouissance*, more often is a source of pain.

Howard’s scheme that delineates women’s world into public/private/personal can be enriched with the *intimate* that would correspond to sexual desire and satisfaction. All these categories, though, often overlap with one another or one category could be included into another category’s scope, or they all might, at certain points, be subsumed by the public, like Chinese boxes that remain distinct within the larger entity. But the very fact that Howard distinguishes between these different realms in which femininity is

caught, is itself an attempt to defy the Virgin Mary image of the mother and re-construct it in correspondence to the needs of contemporary women.

The main focus of this thesis will be to demonstrate the ways in which *Before My Time* and *The Other Side* deconstruct the Catholic myth of the woman as the nurturing mother, epitomized by the Virgin Mary. Gordon and Howard undermine this representation of the “ideal mother” as self-denying, domesticated, nurturing mother, for a more complex and complicated femininity through writing the body, the literal, turning figurative language into expressions of physicality which I analyze in Chapter II. Chapter III explores the strained relationships between mothers and daughters in reiterative narrative patterns that seem characteristic for the Irish American experience. The daughter has to reevaluate the mother’s legacy in order to establish an autonomous self and gain a life that is not reduced to the private only. Gordon and Howard also follow Kristeva’s conviction that the maternal is a position rather than an intrinsic state, hence it is possible to be performed by both parents, as it becomes evident in Chapter IV.

## CHAPTER II

### THE ABJECT MOTHER

In *Powers of Horror* Kristeva defines the abject as the one that “is not my correlative, which, providing me with someone or something else as support, would allow me to be more or less detached and autonomous. The abject has only one quality of the object – that of being opposed to *I*” (1). Kristeva states that a person’s first experience of abjection is the child’s separation from the mother as a nurturing body and the revolt against her as the Other that helps establish one’s own identity on entering the law of the father. Because abjection’s first manifestation is through the mother, for women it is both threatening and familiar, inviting for an identification with her. Although the abject exists outside the symbolic order, when the subject confronts it, it presents a tangible threat because it disrupts the imaginary boundaries of the identity system. In *Reading Kristeva: The Unravelling of the Double-bind* Kelly Oliver analyzes Kristeva’s claim in an interview with Elaine Hoffman Baruch that a woman can have two relationships with the mother: either being unable to figuratively cut the umbilical cord with her, thus carrying along “this living corpse,” or building a defense against her which might, in some cases, reinforce the symbolic order. As an example Kristeva points out feminism itself and Oliver adds that, “Presumably, politics, art, and science are others” (Oliver 62). Neither of these relations, however, seem to lead to “the eroticisation of the mother, which produces

abjection as a source of pleasure” unless it is meant to satisfy the erotic desire of a man or “inside a certain sort of female homosexuality” as Kristeva argues in the interview. The idea of the abjection of the mother is further developed in *Black Sun* where it is taken to an extreme: in order to preserve herself, the daughter has to kill the mother. Oliver interprets this drive towards matricide not as a negation of the mother but as “the negation of the loss of the mother that signals proper entry into language” (62).

By discussing the abject in connection with a maternity that is destabilizing to the symbolic order, Gordon and Howard describe the maternal through the body not of the unthreatening Madonna but through the brutal facts of female physicality. In this way they go beyond the Kristevan project that places the mother in the borderline between language and non-language and, by giving her a voice, restore her to subjecthood.

The abject in *The Other Side* is most fully manifested in the character of Ellen’s mother. Gordon capitalizes on a feminist subject position to present a process of exhausting, serial childbearing that objectifies this character, turning it into a constantly bleeding womb that produces death instead of life. Blood here is not associated with health or life but with filth, waste, and death that gradually ruins the mother “whose body falls beyond the limit” (Kristeva 3). The narrative voice is that of Ellen whose memory of the mother is one of tragic fatality and loss,

I have seen more than you know. The children, born unborn, blood, mess on the floor, the stain that was the hope of family life. My mother moaning: “How can I have done this. Why do I do this?” My beautiful mother (her thin fingers transparent almost when she held them to the light

to show off, to admire her ring), my mother turning, before my eyes into a man, an animal, in darkness, in the total darkness of her mind, gibbering words no one can understand, her feet in black man's boots, like trees rooted, taking root. (129)

The implication is that a slavish desire to comply thoroughly with the Law of the Father de-womanizes this character, turning it into a physical resemblance of a man which builds upon its repulsiveness, gradually de-humanizes it by reducing it to animal characteristics, and finally presenting it in a state of vegetation. Especially poignant is the sharp contrast in the text between the beautiful, gentle, ethereal mother that haunts Ellen's memories and the mute creature, "bearded, with lifeless eyes" into which she is transformed.

Simultaneously, Ellen, though repelled by the mother's degeneration, is constantly drawn to her through a conflation of memory, anger, and guilt that result in a reversal of roles, in mothering the mother who is reduced to the state of helplessness comparable to that of a baby. In this mother-daughter dyad the daughter's autonomous self and subjectivity are affirmed at the expense of the mother's deterioration, not of her defeat by the daughter but of what the mother represents. And the mother in her misery and filth stands, by extension, for the Other Side, for Ireland herself, as seen by Ellen. Ireland of the poor is what Ellen rejects, calling it

a bog, a backwater, a filthy hole. She mocked the rich first generation greenhorns who took their families back home. To see what? she would say. The cattle shitting in the streets, right up to your door, the children with their teeth rotted out of their heads, the beautiful thatched cottages

swept only once a year, the tinkers carrying their filthy babies in their filthy blankets? (Gordon 159)

The quotation permeates with images of body liquids and scatological discharge which strike a sharp contrast with Vincent and Delia's sentimental memories of warmth and coziness, epitomized in images of maternal nurture, such as "the goodness of milk" and "the lovely bread" that make a rather direct association to ideal femininity promoted by Catholicism, Ellen's third abject, "She'd never go into a church" (148). Thus mother/Ireland/Catholic church blend into a complex image of feminine legacy that is a foil against which the main protagonist establishes her self.

When Ellen confronts the abject, her physical reaction is not that of repulsion and nausea but of suppressed anger. In this respect Ellen is far from being a "mater dolorosa" but is vividly a "mater furiosa," anger being her major characteristic. In the quotation about the mother's sad transformation, Ellen addresses her friend Bella in an imaginary conversation about the suffering of an Irish mother, respectively of womankind in general, in childbirth. The passage indicates the mother's position in the liminal space between the semiotic and the symbolic and Ellen, in a parallel position, between silence and speech, the desire and the fear of expressing the unspeakable and the potential of language that could be used to subvert the symbolic for feminist ends. The mother is pitiable and repulsive but what is more repulsive is the description of the real enemy, the androcentric sexual drive that not only generates filth but is itself revolting, "Men are brutal animals, the yellow teeth, the red eyes, and the damp, destructive breath. I see always in the darkness, in the silence. I keep it all in my mind, which, though not as good

as yours, lets go of nothing” (Gordon 130). In this situation Ellen is already a subject in process: she positions herself as a corrective to the social order and turns into a rescuer of the mother, an active position usually taken by the good hero. Although it is Vincent who fulfills the mission, Ellen is the active proponent that makes the journey possible and Vincent becomes an indispensable tool.

Ellen in her deathbed is another representation of the abject. Her grotesque, spare body, hands like “claw[s], paper, bone,” and toothless bare gums do not evoke pity but fear mostly, because, in contrast to her mother, Ellen protests her condition.

She is horrified by her physical weakness. She hasn't liked her body. Times with Vincent, though, she did. Now she regrets what she let him do to her. She allowed him to unseal her; it is his fault now that life spills out of her, spills over into death. She wishes herself intact. She curses Vincent for the thing he did. Why did she let him? She wants a stone now for a body, smooth, a weapon, closed. Now her body keeps nothing back. [...]

Out of her mouth come filthy warnings. Words she doesn't know she heard but understands. It must be stopped; she must tell all of them.

(Gordon 104-5)

It is not material, scatological filth that the body releases but language that is itself polluted. In contrast to the mute mother, in the liminal space between life and death that she occupies Ellen gives vent to a torrent of terrible curses. Filth is not literal in this case but figurative; yet using the language of the father, Ellen defies decency, one of the norms

of the symbolic order. The narration invites the reader to interpret this emotional release as a cathartic moment too, as a primal, maternal, body equivalent of the last sacrament that belongs to the symbolic order. At this point Ellen is on the borderline between the world of order and chaos; she obtains a very ambivalent position – simultaneously facing the abject, her own fears, and being it for the rest of her family. She terrifies her great-granddaughters: “[Staci] squints so that before her eye is not a woman but the idea of what she can bear Ellen to be. [...] But she is still frightened” (Gordon 365). Through this manipulation of seeing the granddaughter takes an active position: she distorts the incarnation of the abject turning it into a different vision, an idea, thus pushing it to a tolerable distance. In this instance Gordon demonstrates the literal and the figurative at play, transforming them deftly into one another.

Whether or not has Gordon ever come across Kristeva’s interview with Baruch, she makes a very literal use of her metaphor of the abject mother that we carry with us as a burden and cannot get rid of, by shaping her into a character in a novel. Thus she attempts at fulfilling one of the tasks of women writers, to subvert the metaphorical language of patriarchy by embracing the literal (translated as women’s conscious identification with nature, the body, the material) and be aware that “the shift from figurative to literal and back again is heavily charged with mythic and thematic significance, for if literalization suggests a move in the direction of a mother-daughter language, figuration suggests a return to the paternal symbolic” according to Margaret Homans in *Bearing the Word* (30). So by literalizing the haunting ghost of the semiotic mother into the text, Gordon expresses her special relation to a maternal language.

Another instance of the abject is Ellen's physicality contrasted to her daughters. Magdalene's beauty and elegance and Theresa's prettiness and cleanness provide a counterpoint for Ellen's negligence to fashion. Her physicality is best described through a comparison to the mothers of the fifties who

were corseted even for housework; they wore scarves around their pin-curls and their housedresses were not like Ellen's; on theirs you smelt detergent and felt the fabric stiffened by starch. His grandmother wore dresses limp from washing, sweaters even in the summer, cardigans with silver buttons, thick stockings the shade of milky coffee, in the forties worn-out pairs of old black shoes and in the fifties sneakers, navy-blue.

Her hand, still covered with wet earth, arranged tight bunches of flowers in a glass. (Gordon 73)

The overall impression is that Ellen easily slides into the ancient mother archetype, especially when positioned among the abundance of flowers, i.e. symbols of fertility. Her domesticity and cleanness, however, are challenged by Theresa who warns her children not to eat anything at their grandmother's, thus turning Ellen into the bad mother figure of a witch from a fairy tale. Theresa's denial of food correlates to Kristeva's assumption of food loathing as one of the most archaic forms of abjection. Yet the abject in this case merges with the old type of house keeping that is inefficient to preserve immaculate cleanness. "Theresa believed in contamination. She would bring her children in modern life, safe from her mother's filth" (Gordon 331). The efficient mother, having faith in chemical products, replaces the traditional housewife. Theresa's triumph over the abject

mother, her jouissance, becomes complete when it moves from the private sphere, the family, into the public: her Bible study group. "Her group believes in healing. Every day they pray for Ellen, whom they call only "Theresa's mother." Hearing this, Theresa feels a flame of inward joy that her name in the group has blotted out her mother's name" (Gordon 184).

On the other pole is Magdalene's total rejection of domesticity for the sake of professional fulfillment, "the truth was that she didn't want to be detained for a second longer than need be in the domestic world her mother's house embodied" (Gordon 210) and the role of the glorious mother, always dressed-up to the occasion, that is incompatible with the housewife. What the narrative suggests as most objectionable, though, is the suffocation of the private, mother's love, by the public, Roosevelt's politics. Theresa and Magdalene's physicality finds expression in their punishment of the unloving mother. Theresa learns how to hold her body so it would be a reproach and "how to torment her mother, it gave her pleasure to torment" (Gordon 224). Magdalene's punishment is made physical by the sound of her accusing, drunken voice. If Kristeva is right that "jouissance alone causes the abject to exist as such" (*Powers of Horror* 9), and jouissance is derived from punishment, then Theresa and Magdalene denying the abject, angry mother become her in their passion, not through bearing the child, but through bearing the feeling, and in so doing, they perpetuate the process by serving as abject to the next generation. Towards the end of the novel Cam, having made numerous futile attempts to reconcile Magdalene with her parents and reunite her with her family, arrives at the conclusion, "I do not love my mother" (Gordon 320). The narrator describes

Sheilah's driving force solely along the daughter/mother axis, "Her attention, her ambition focus on demolishing her mother" (Gordon 358), thus expressing the general attitude of Theresa's children to Theresa.

Apart from embodying the abject as the mother, Gordon writes the grotesque body in a female shape too. In so doing she works against the constrictions that the ideal of the beautiful Madonna presents for women. The bearded mother, Ellen turned into a mummy figure on her deathbed, Magdalene with her breasts cut out, Cam whose womb is removed are all examples of femininity that rebukes a motherhood reduced to fetishistic admiration of the maternal body. Gordon makes a larger claim about motherhood here by projecting some of the main issues about femininity relevant today. Is it poetic license that Magdalene, the mother who refuses to bring up her own daughter has her breasts removed, the organ that produces nourishment and that is so often used in art as a synecdoche for maternity? Or is it an ironic literalization of freedom from a motherhood licensed by the law of the father? Should Cam be considered a lesser woman if she is deprived from giving birth? In my view, the very fact that Gordon stimulates the reader to ask these questions already discusses traditional motherhood as problematic, with all the venues open to women in the social sphere and some perils to which the body is biologically susceptible.

Another break with patriarchal conventions is Howard and Gordon's interest in the sexual body. They present the issue as one of the strongest definitions of the self that more often than not is the counterpart of motherhood. Millie is one of the characters that represent an easiness about the female body which is transported from the intimate, her

relationship with her husband, to the private sphere, her relationship with her children. “Mill was remarkably free with her body around the house. He hated her semi-nudity in front of the children, yet she persisted with a simplicity that held no defiance” (25). This liberatory mode, however, is described as problematic, “Her children had become excessively modest which should have scored a point for him [Jack Cogan]” (Howard 26). In this scene it is the mother who is described as aware of the body as a natural entity without investing it with fetishistic elements while the father makes futile attempts to restore the norm of socially acceptable decency. “But the exposure of her body was perfectly natural [...] in winter she would strip to her underwear and carry on with the normal routine – checking Cormac’s homework, peeling potatoes, feeding the cat” (Howard 26). Howard takes the discussion of semi-nudity a step further, from the private to the public, with Millie’s account of her first encounter with Shelley, which obviously reflects the sexual revolution of the 60s in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. “The hair! The hair! Down to her rump and wild. No underwear – she sat down uninvited and when Cormac came close to get a look I thought he’d die. Her breasts joggling in front of the boy” (Howard 28). Obviously, at this stage the female body is boldly taken out of the closet, evoking controversial reactions on the part of the characters.

In *The Other Side* when it comes to the body Ellen and Vincent do not go beyond the realm of the intimate. Gordon describes Vincent’s body as sexually attractive but does not make a fetish out of it. His youthful body is boyish, its whiteness could be considered feminine, his hands have both feminine and masculine characteristics: “the strong, protective legs, the feet, boyish, white, surprising for a man who worked as he did”

(Gordon 136), "She'd loved the darkness of his hair against the white skin, surprising a man's skin could be so white. [...] His hands, small for a workman, were covered by sparse, dark hairs" (Gordon 137). In his golden age, Vincent is still desirable. Marilyn's recollection connects Vincent's soothing effect with his physicality, "She thinks of her grandfather's body. Sexual even now. Women responded to him, knowing his sympathy for them. The women at the home with him. The poor nun that Cam made fun of. All of us, even Sheilah, felt favored in his sight. But we were wrong. Only his wife was favored" (Gordon 331). Ellen's appreciation of Vincent's body positions the male body as an object of desire, "Better known than her own body, for she has looked freely at the whole of his as she had not looked at her own" (Gordon 136) and simultaneously reveals the restrictions which patriarchal culture imposes on a narcissistic attitude to the female body.

Cam's hysterectomy can be read as an extreme case of privileging the public over the private, of a career over motherhood on the part of the professional woman. It also opens a venue for exploration of the intimate, and the tension between the duties and conventions of a futile marriage, on the one hand, and celebrating sexual desire outside its confines, on the other. Cam realizes the drastic change from painful sexual experience in the name of motherhood to a jouissance from the sexual act as a reassurance of femininity without it in a narcissistic revelation, "She looked into the mirror above the sink. Her own face surprised her pleasantly. It looked so happy" (Gordon 325). In a way, Cam's pleasure of indulging her sexual drive is diametrically opposite to the dutiful childbearing of Ellen's mother. Making Cam one of the protagonists in the novel, Gordon seems to direct

the reader's attention to the problems of female sexuality and to condemn its repression and its narrowing to conception. Such an attempt is in line with Kristeva's warning about the oppressive image of the mother and a challenge to the dogmas of Christianity concerning femininity, and to conservative Catholicism in particular.

Writing the female body not in its alluring attractiveness to the father or its nurturing safety to the child but in its acknowledgement by the daughter, Howard and Gordon explore feminine experience of physicality in its raw naturalness that makes the intimate public and establishes the woman as the speaking subject. Simultaneously, they openly defy Catholicism that discourages discussions about the body and frowns prudishly at attempts to take it out of the closet. In this way they demonstrate their willingness to destabilize those conservative social norms that straitjacket Irish American women and prevent them from epistemological grasp of their experience. Howard summarizes this revolt of the daughter against silencing the body in her biographical book, *Facts of Life*, "I blamed our mothers [...]. Damn them, they never told us anything we needed to know" (147). *Before My Time* and *The Other Side*, however, provide discursive strategies that undermine this silence.

## CHAPTER III

### OTHERS AND DAUGHTERS

Gordon and Howard's agendas overlap in breaking the traditional patriarchal model of presenting women within the saint/sinner dichotomy embedded in Christianity and emphasized by Roman Catholicism through the cult of the Virgin Mary. Feminist critics, Judith Butler most prominent among them, have reproached Kristeva for reducing femininity to motherhood thus reiterating and reinforcing a patriarchal view on women's experience. In *Stabat Mater* though Kristeva analyzes how Christianity, and Catholicism in particular, produce a version of femininity that is subsumed in motherhood, which Kristeva calls a *fantasy*, "an idealization of primary narcissism" (308). She argues that

when feminism demands a new representation of femininity, it seems to identify motherhood with that idealized misconception and, because it rejects the image and its misuse, feminism circumvents the real experience that fantasy overshadows. The result? – a negation or rejection of motherhood by some avant-guard feminist groups. Or else an acceptance – conscious or not – of its traditional representation by the great mass of people, women and men." (308)

Put like that, Kristeva's argument recognizes feminism's concern that femininity should not be exclusively identified with motherhood. She also holds that motherhood is a

relationship, not just an “ideal”, traditional image that must be rejected. She points out this misconception of motherhood as the target for rejection by some radical feminists in France and, on the other hand, its unquestionable acceptance by the large majority in the western culture. The implication is that none of the sides is on the right track and, consequently, that this image of maternity should be subjected to analysis to the benefit not solely of womankind but of humanity. These concerns make Kristeva’s argument on the maternal relevant and important for the feminist cause of the 70s and the 80s of the 20<sup>th</sup> century when *Before My Time* and *The Other Side* appeared as well as for the contemporary readers of these novels.

The “maternal” for Kristeva is two-dimensional: a nurturing principle typical for the species and a principle that originates in the human identity crisis through which the materiality of the body is imagined through language. Kristeva points out that such a reading of the maternal posits two fundamental questions, “What is there in the portrayal of the Maternal in general and particularly in its Christian, virginal, one, that reduces social anguish and gratifies a male being; what is there that also satisfies a woman so that a commonality of the sexes is set up, beyond and in spite of their glaring incompatibility and permanent warfare?” (310). The answer is that maternal power is marginalized and subdued by the symbolic order of the father and the satisfaction of the woman is nonetheless a promotion of masochism, masked as a reward of pleasure for human reproduction and continuity, whose main role is to stabilize social order. She also emphasizes the necessary separation of mother and child thus marking the beginning of the child’s identity and warns that this process is more complex for the female child. In

“Motherhood According to Giovanni Bellini” she demonstrates the daughter’s necessary denial of the mother in order to identify with her. Kristeva points out a troublesome, paradoxical moment: the daughter should refuse the mother in order to embrace her and desire motherhood in order to become her. The following citation from *Desire in Language* best illustrates Kristeva’s contribution to this discourse,

Such an excursion to the limits of primal regression can be phantasmatically experienced as the reunion of a woman-mother with the body of *her* mother. The body of her mother is always the same Master-Mother of instinctual drive, a ruler over psychosis, a subject of biology, but also, one toward which women aspire all the more passionately simply because it lacks a penis: that body cannot penetrate her as can a man when possessing his wife. By giving birth, the woman enters into contact with her mother; she becomes, she is her own mother; they are the same continuity differentiating itself. She thus actualizes the homosexual facet of motherhood, through which a woman is simultaneously closer to her instinctual memory, more open to her own psychosis, and consequently, more [sic] negatory to the social, symbolic bond. (Kristeva 239)

Central for this chapter is the strenuous desire of the daughter to deny the mother in order to gain identity.

From this perspective, Gordon and Howard describe the absence of the mother as this necessary loss that gives voice to the daughter to identify herself and her own desires (Laura, Elizabeth, Isabel). Their texts also uncover the ineptitude of the image of the

Virgin Mary as paragon of motherhood by marginalizing the nurturing mothers – Delia and Vincent’s mother in *The Other Side* and Laura’s and Millie’s mothers in *Before My Time*.

Indeed, very few of the female characters meet the description of the benign, sacrificial mother. Both Gordon and Howard create images of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century intellectual woman, more interested in changing the world than raising a family. In both novels she is Jewish, embodied by Bella in *The Other Side*, an example for Ellen as the socially active woman, and by Hoshie Feinmark’s mother in *Before My Time* who remains nameless but is vividly sketched in a couple of paragraphs as a wealthy “Venetian Jewess of great beauty and intensity” who has chosen to imitate “the abject poverty of the truly poor” (Howard 184). Both characters are unequivocally Other – they do not belong to the Irish community and they simply disappear too soon in both plots. Bella is never referred to in terms of domesticity, and the closest Hoshie’s mother comes to the three K (kinder, küche, kirche) is in the son’s brief and bitter memory of her, “My mother never went near a temple. Karl Marx, Bakunin hung over her stove. A cold woman, so high-minded I never got a meal. She wrote editorials for the anarchist papers and got out pamphlets for the unions. Hundreds of them. I drew in the margins while my father held meetings in the back of tailor shops and bakeries” (Howard 183). This portrayal is the diametrical opposite to the idea of the simple, kind-hearted, pious Catholic mother, represented in *The Other Side* by Delia and by the good and self-sacrificial Mrs. Murray, Millicent’s mother, in *Before My Time*. Though both Hoshie’s mother and Bella are marginal, they present a possibility of intellectual fulfillment that is

to be embraced and realized by the next generations of middle-class characters within the Irish community, such as Laura and Cam. Thus Ellen appears to be so pivotal because she inhabits the liminal space between public activity and domesticity, where the public is described as primary and the private as subordinated to it. The kitchen, the traditional space of the housewife, in this case turns into a ground for political debate as well in which the female protagonist is an active participant.

So when, in 1935, Ellen agreed to use the house as a meeting place for the five fellows from the shop who needed a place to talk about their plans, their ideas, fears, procedures, he was doubly grateful, knowing it didn't come easy to her. But she seemed happy with them there. They'd all sit at the kitchen table. She'd stand at the sink, holding back at first, then entering into the talk. They saw her brains and appreciated her." (Gordon 297)

Thus by opening her home for social issues and engaging herself with it, Ellen privileges the public to the private.

The mother in *The Other Side* and *Before My Time* is frequently absent, sick and needing care, dying or already dead, or, if healthy and present, assuming the air of an unloving step-mother. What second wave feminism takes as one of its primary goals – exploring the relationship between a mother and her daughter(s) – comes as a specific topic of interest, frosted with an Irish sense of irony and drama.

Both novels operate within a short time-span: the whole plot of *The Other Side*

develops within the limits of one day, August 14, while *Before My Time* covers a few weeks just before the summer solstice. The matriarch is dying; the time of the stern, unloving, displeased mother is over. By choosing the eve of one of the most important holidays in the Catholic calendar, the assumption of the Virgin Mary, August 15, Gordon seems to make a political point about the main character in *The Other Side*, making the death of the formidable mother tangential to the celebration of the patriarchal paragon of femininity. If *The Other Side* marks the end of an era, *Before My Time* not only responds with a parallel death, the death of the patriarch, Hoshie Feinmark, but already unfolds another period, in which the focus is on the new woman, facing a middle-age crisis, trying to reconcile with the past and uncertain about the future. Mary Gordon too kills the figure of the patriarch in her first novel, *Final Payments*, which allows the narrative to launch the main character, Isabel, into intoxicating freedom and turbulent responsibility to make her own decisions. Howard, on her part, releases Mary Agnes Keeley, in *Bridgeport Bus* from the grip of an aging mother in order to enjoy a life on her own and give vent to her creative spirit. Thus the two writers foreground the advent of a world without oppressive, constraining figures that stunt the lives of a generation of middle-aged women.

*Before My Time* makes the absent or the dead mother conspicuous: “‘She [Millie] had to grow up,’ said Jim Cogan, ‘Her mother died’” (50). Millie’s attitude to her mother, another nameless character, is explicit: “‘The memory of her mother’s goodness and self-sacrifice annoyed Mill’” (149). Love does not seem to be an issue; the proof of the mother’s existence is only in the daughter’s memory and in the arrangement of the apartment that she managed to secure for her family. Yet for the daughter she is a “fading

ghost.” It is significant that there is not a single photo of the mother - her total effacement emphasizes the symbolic order more prominently. The narrator’s voice is more one of accusation than pity: “There was not one picture of that good lady here in her bedroom. She had been too shy to pose even for a family group.” The whole portrayal of the nameless Mrs. Murray is held in a single paragraph which indicates her marginalization, just like Hoshie’s mother. Millie’s denial of her is full and doubtless, “One thing was certain to Mill: she was not like her mother at all” (Howard 149).

Laura’s mother is also absent and pushed to the margin because she represents another type of conformity to the symbolic order. She is an ideal Stepford wife. She too is nameless, only referred to as the Judge’s wife, i.e. entirely identified through the dignity of her husband’s office. Howard unquestionably satirizes this Barbie-doll character for its shallowness and limitations through the estimation of the daughter,

The worldly air my mother sported soon proved to be no deeper than her closet full of flapper’s costumes. She was a simple woman, but I do remember when an occasion came for my parents to dress up she was awesome, like no one else in their set. How odd it must have been for her dinner partner at a political meeting to find that this Juno, the Judge’s wife, had no conversation beyond the banalities of her kitchen and children. (Howard 86)

The mother’s absence provides ground for Laura’s reinscription as an intellectual in search of her true voice and personal fulfillment. Yet what brings the mother and the daughter together is a dramatic, stately beauty; what separates them is that with the

mother the beauty is her main asset while with the daughter the wounded dress expresses her inner struggle with conformity to social life and turns into a metaphor of her middle age crisis.

Towards the end of the novel, Elizabeth's mother dies, leaving her full of guilt for taking a holiday trip - "I went away and when I came back she was dead" (Howard 234). Instead of grieving openly, Elizabeth writes business letters to conceal her pain. Enticing pleasure with death, Howard cleverly devises a crux that holds this character torn between the private and the personal, between filial duty and desire.

Nurturing the mother becomes a fake substitution of motherhood, thus putting Elizabeth in the boat of all those dragging the "living corpse," like Shelley, Mary Agnes from *Bridgeport Bus*, Cam from *The Other Side*. Elizabeth's incapability to express her grief other than replacing it with frantic work demonstrates her submission to Symbolic order, sealed by the embrace of the father, "Harry controls her, holds her now. That's what she wants. All the years she has denied herself his embrace ... death is the occasion for it, sanctions the fatherly touch" (Howard 234).

The mother is also absent in Gordon's first novel, *Final Payments*, thus presenting a choice for Isabel to create her own self by denouncing Margaret, the surrogate mother, then nurturing her, only to deny her again and break free from a sense of guilt. Here guilt, caused by fornication, is the focal point of several perspectives: violation of the Father's law (social norm), beguilement of a best friend's trust (moral issue), and experience of jouissance (sexual fulfillment). Caring for Margaret simultaneously becomes a

punishment and a redemption, succumbing to the symbolic order and making even with it.

The mother-daughter relations as described in the two novels take unusual dimensions: they are never easy but much strained, the daughter is expected to perform the stereotypical woman's domestic role: clean the house, prepare meals and serve them, be always grateful for her mother's care and attention and efforts to raise her through her childhood. The mother is almost always a professional, busy to make the world an acceptable, if not a better place, imposing greater expectations on the daughter which she, generally, fails to meet. Ellen is angry that her daughters do not embrace worthwhile causes, Magdalene complains that Cam usually contradicts her, Mary Waltz disapproves of Shelley's slovenliness, Mary Agnes's mother nags her for not getting married, Maude objects to Elizabeth's getting off stage in favor of marriage. In these relationships, astonishingly built according to the patriarchal masculine/feminine social positions, the mother assumes the masculine part of active dominance and control over the daughter's life and the daughter that of silenced or begrudging submission; that strangely reiterates the existing patriarchal model rather than breaking away from it. Are Gordon and Howard taking a feminist position and warning the reader against the dangers of simply assuming and appropriating a patriarchal model by changing the players from a husband/wife to a mother/daughter relationship? The daughter does not really manage to sever the umbilical cord with the mother, in Kristeva's sense, in order to establish herself as an individual independent truly from the mother's demands. The situation becomes even more complex when the traditional visualization of the woman in Judeo-Christian culture is

superimposed: either a Virgin Mary or a Mary Magdalene, either a saint or a sinner.

Neither of the characters falls into the trap of such sharp polarization which only emphasizes the writers' intent to discredit its incongruousness to the modern world.

Shelley Waltz's mother, Mary Waltz, is as harsh to her daughter as Ellen is to Magdalene and Theresa, and as Theresa is to her three children. The Cinderella story is quite apparent, yet the step-mother is replaced by one's own mother, always critical and hard to please, that suggests a pattern going beyond the novels under discussion; a Jungian reading would suggest a creative interpretation of the Terrible Mother. Gordon's other novels describe friendly relations between a younger and an older woman, like Anne and Jane in *Men and Angels*, or between women of the same generation, like in *A Company of Women*. Yet the mother-daughter relations are never easy. Howard, too, investigates them and suggests an ironic reversal of roles – in *Grace Abounding* Elizabeth takes care of her mother with patience and tolerance usually reserved for a spoilt child. So does Shelley from *Before My Time*, and Mary Agnes from *Bridgeport Bus*. In a way, they are all turned not only into domestic servants by their mothers but also slaves of filial guilt and duty. The mothers often practice emotional blackmail. Howard even stretches the image of the stern mother a little further, to include another ethnic group, though still within the boundaries of Catholicism, and though not only bound to a daughter. Silvio from *Before My Time* describes his mother as “gruff, somewhat cruel – calling him professor. He'd be late at the bakery and they would get another boy” (Howard 63). Thus Howard provides an example of the performativity of the maternal and its trans-gender and trans-ethnic features.

The mothers take a masculine position when paired with their daughters in the private sphere; in the public, they are professionals who take care of other human beings that are helpless and need treatment/therapy. Mary Waltz from *Before My Time* is a nurse, Maude from *Grace Abounding* is a psychiatrist. They professionally nurture infants and mentally challenged children on a large scale thus splitting the nature/nurture dichotomy, yet remaining in the realm of the feminine. On the other hand, by concentrating their motherly attention to objects outside the family, they transfer a characteristic of the private into the realm of the public.

One of the central conflicts in *The Other Side* is between Cam and Theresa, the childless woman and the formidable mother. It comes to its climax in the middle of the novel when Theresa suggests that the family should pack and help Vincent vacate the house. This scene is important in several ways: it vividly describes the relations of power in the family, the meaningful image of the house, and the consequences of maternal harshness.

Marilyn and Dan listen to them, standing in the doorway of Ellen's room. They watch everyone fall into place: Cam and Theresa fixed at the center, the antagonists; Sheilah in back of her mother urging injury; Ray and his son John, outside the circle, knowing no act of theirs can have weight. Marilyn hangs behind Dan a little, waiting for him to walk between the two antagonists, to fool them, to distract them, sing, tell a joke, make a remark on the weather, anything to make them stop.

"I thought we were going for a walk," Dan says to Cam.

Cam walks out of the house ahead of him and bangs the screen door. He can see the line of it, starting with Ellen, hating herself, refusing to love her daughters, stealing him from his mother, taking Cam from Magdalene; he sees John and Sheilah in their mother's blackened house. And he and Marilyn always a little desperate: We'll fix it, wait a minute, we'll do something; it will be all right. (Gordon 158)

In this scene Gordon makes explicit the revolt of Cam, the neglected daughter, against Theresa, the terrible mother. These are the two strongest female characters of different generations, who has experienced Ellen's best and worst attitude to daughter figures. They are literally positioned in the center of the house, claiming it as a territory of influence, like fighters surrounded by the rest of the family. The male characters stand at the margins of the room, assuming their life roles of not intervening. Dan and Malilyn, the mediators, move from the matriarch's space to the conflict zone. The scene is emblematic for the powerful claim of the female characters for control of the private, the extended family, that overlaps with the public because the house immediately turns into a public arena of confrontation between the generations. What is at stake is the past and its re-evaluation. Is the sin of the mother, her failure to love her daughters, transmitted through the generations and perpetuated by the daughters? Is it an irreversible process? It has its ramifications in the latest generation, when Sheilah senses Staci's defiance, "She wants to say to Staci: For people like us, outside this circle of favor, forced as we are to punish, to draw blood, how could there even be forgiveness?" (Gordon 363). Forgiveness and compassion, the stereotypical characteristics of the benign, ideal mother are not

applicable for the MacNamara women; the irony here is that this conclusion is offered through the character that is in the most vulnerable and least successful in fighting the mother, yet probably the most successful as a mother. In this respect Vincent's estimation of Sheilah is favorable, "And the little boy seemed nice. She was a good mother to him, warm, although her mother hadn't been" (Gordon 287). So Gordon projects two possibilities in the development of the mother/child relationship, though leaving the ending open – there is no final reconciliation or resolution of the conflicts within the family, there are no winners, yet the characters re-evaluate their choices and are brought back to the house as their private/public space to pay homage for the dying mother.

By discussing the mother/daughter relationships in the contemporary Irish American family, Gordon and Howard break away from the image of the ideal mother, "normalized" by the patriarchal symbolic order and sanctioned by Catholicism. They describe the threat of what Linda Zerlini calls "the maternal reengulfment" in her analysis of Beauvoir and Kristeva's concepts of maternity. While Zerlini is interested in how Kristeva portrays male fear of maternal reengulfment, Gordon and Howard describe the female fear, resentment, and/or rejection of the domineering mother. Their narrative strategies include a variety of ways in which the daughter's identity is established: by open confrontation, by escape, and by the absence of the mother, which demonstrates the complexity of transpositions from the private to the public domain, which, more often than not, take into consideration or are in favor of the personal.

## CHAPTER IV

### SYMBOLIC ORDER RENOUNCED AND REINSCRIBED

When Toril Moi differentiates between the categories of the feminist, the female, and the feminine in her essay titled "Feminist, Female, Feminine," she points out that the feminine is the most vague and slippery of the three. For her Kristeva's conception of femininity is intrinsically bound to marginality which "allows us to view this repression of the feminine in terms of *positionality* rather than of essences. What is perceived as marginal at any given time depends on the position one occupies" (Moi 112). And since in the symbolic order women are prescribed a marginal position, they occupy a liminal space, a frontier that can become the battleground for de-centering and destabilizing the very symbolic order. Moi points out that such a view precludes "the dangers of biologism (conflation with femaleness)" and explains the importance of Kristeva's deconstructive approach to sexual difference outlined in "Women's Time" for the purposes of feminist political struggle. Moi summarizes three strategies that, in fact, coincide with the historical development of the feminist movement:

- (1) Women demand equal access to the symbolic order. Liberal feminism.  
Equality.
- (2) Women reject the male symbolic order in the name of difference.  
Radical feminism. Femininity extolled

(3) Women reject the dichotomy between masculine and feminine as metaphysical. (This is Kristeva's own position.) (Moi 112)

Kristeva's position then bursts open the rigid constructs of the symbolic order and challenges the very concept of identity, "What does 'identity' and even sexual identity" mean in a theoretical and scientific space in which the notion of "identity" itself is challenged?" (209) asks she in "Women's Time". If the masculine and the feminine are just positions, then they can be occupied interchangeably by both men and women, depending on the situation. The step to the idea of the performativity of gender roles should not be too broad. In *Reading Kristeva: the Unraveling of the Double-bind* Kelly Oliver offers a similar argument, taking the explanation a little further:

Also, in her best moments, especially in her latest work, Kristeva is careful to distinguish the feminine from woman and both of these notions from maternity. She suggests that the maternal operates as a function that, in principle, can be performed by both men and women. Kristeva wants to take us beyond categories that have traditionally been used to limit us, all of us, both women and men. She wants to conceive of a notion of difference that does not operate according to a dualist logic of opposition. It has become important to Kristeva's argument that both woman and the feminine are not reduced to maternity. She suggests that women's oppression is partially the result of Western culture's reduction of women to reproduction. (7)

If the maternal is a function, then by default, the paternal should also be a function, although it is not discussed at such length. Obviously, neither Kristeva, nor Moi, nor Oliver is very interested in the extent to which the paternal is subsumed into the masculine and whether a reduction, similar to feminine/maternal is at play with masculine/paternal. Considering the maternal a function, however, opens possibilities of breaking the rigidity of the parental roles that the symbolic order prescribes for men and women and of a fluidity of their perception and participation in them. In my view, Howard and Gordon make attempts to subvert such clear-cut distinctions and relocate and reinscribe them through their characters.

Both Howard and Gordon also follow Kristeva's conviction that the maternal and the paternal are positions rather than intrinsic states as she claims in *Tales of Love*, hence allowing both parents to inhabit these identities. Kristeva explains the maternal position as "gratifying needs, 'holding'" while the paternal one is responsible for "the differentiation, distance, and prohibition that produces both meaning and absurdity" (143) and claims that these positions "are intermingled and severed, infinitely and without end." By producing main characters that do not conform to the stereotypes of strong, willful men and nice housewives, Gordon and Howard urge the reader to acknowledge the performativity of the maternal and the paternal.

There are several pairs of characters where this performativity is made distinct, usually through the perspectives of different narrators, thus describing a process of characterization including several generations. *Before My Time* introduces Millie and Jack Cogan, a common, lower-middle class couple of a housewife and a breadwinner.

What makes them peculiar and memorable are Millie's drinking and Jack's gambling, activities generally attributed to a tough masculinity, and their constant financial troubles. Of the two, Millie takes the upper hand in critical situations, punishing Jack for his habit, "Jack Cogan [...] was defenseless against Mill's real elation, her triumph over him when his loss was fresh" (Howard 21). The opening scene describes a guilty Jack, sneaking home and performing duties characteristic for a homemaker – watering the plants, talking to the cat, making tea, listening to Millie's account of the major events during the day. Jack is also described as a protective screen between the mother and the children, when Millie insists that the twins should act according to their gender roles, "[their] father who was usually on their side, said, 'I can see your point, Mill, but I don't want to be around when you tell them'" (Howard 163), but, as the quotation suggests, he is not always successful in protecting the children from their forceful mother.

Jack's sympathetic listening is the feminine quality that establishes his close friendship with Hoshie Feinmark. Though Jack expects to see in Hoshie Feinmark the stereotypical modern patriarch, a founder of a financial empire, the text subverts this idea and presents Hoshie as an obsolete figure of the past without actual power, whose empire is run by his sons. Howard provides an unmistakable Freudian simile to describe him as helpless and insignificant, "Hoshie rocked in his bright red chair which engulfed his shrunken body like an womb" (Howard 193). In this instance Howard works against the Kristevan portrayal of the male fear of maternal reengulfment by isolating and estranging Hoshie both from the public - the world of business - and the private - the family - thus displacing the father-figure from its central position. The text indicates the disintegration

of the modern-day family and the deteriorating idea of the formidable father. Hoshie and Jack develop a cordial father/son relationship based on intellectual interests and Jack becomes the surrogate child Hoshie never had. "My children are strangers. My grandchildren amuse me. They live off the fruits of my empire with all their leftist jargon, my mother's talk again" (Howard 197). Cogan is the only one at Hoshie's funeral who sincerely mourns him. From this aspect, tension and estrangement in the family seem to be more generational than ethnic characteristics. The powerful father figure, though, is seriously undermined and Hoshie's death can also be read as a pronouncement on the death of old-fashioned patriarchy.

*Before My Time* ends with a scene in which Harry, the stereotypical father busy with great social projects, is caring after the children and learning the game that they usually play with the mother. "It is a troubling scene – that of a father who spends little time with the kids, being instructed [...] Later I cried, filled with such pity, such forgiveness as I watched him, for I saw that he made the supreme sacrifice, that he moved his soldiers foolishly so that his children could win" (Howard 240). The narrator at this point is the mother, Laura, who is watching the scene from the outside. Thus the novel ends with the parents inhabiting each other's traditional roles, Laura free to pursue her personal goals, Harry simultaneously exchanging the public for the private and reducing his paternal authority to a playmate companionship for a while. Having been published much earlier than *The Other Side*, it could be safely claimed that *Before My Time* traces the way for the later text in which the maternal and the paternal are destabilized and relocated.

In *The Other Side* Theresa and Ray swap the roles of the punishing father and worried mother, "Marilyn thinks of her mother's harshness, of her frightened father, flattened out" (Gordon 332). The daughter's estimation of their attitudes provides the judgment of the latest adult generation, facing a more pronounced crisis in family relations. Dan's musing about his grandparents, who have replaced for him and Cam their own parents, throws light on the effect of associating motion with Ellen's femininity and stability with Vincent's masculinity. "What differences had it made in their lives? Of the two, he was the more at peace, she was the more seeing. She had force; the steadiness was his. If you wanted the truth of something, you would go to her. If you needed comfort, though, you'd stand just near him. The closeness of his body meant the world was safe" (Gordon 345). Truth and safety, which in the symbolic order are respectively the domains of the father and of the mother, are displaced in this particular parental pair.

Although female experience is central to *Before My Time* and *The Other Side*, male characters are also given a voice. They are neither marginalized, nor shut out from the scene. Actually, *The Other Side* is praised by critics such as Pearl Bell, John Breslin, and John Neary, for its carefully balanced plot and for Gordon's obvious effort to come up with vivid and wholesome male characters. Her previous novels offer sketchy ones, or at best, a father figure of a priest that is more of an intellectual than spiritual guide to the young heroine, like tense Cyprian to Felicitas in *A Company of Women*, or kind Father Mulcahy to Isabel in *Final Payments*.

The male characters that appear in *The Other Side* are not of the stereotypical macho kind. The principal ones, Vincent and Dan, are both calm and benign, always

ready to listen to complaints, and having a soothing effect on everybody around. Put like that, they obtain certain feminine traits of nurture that do not, however, undermine their masculinity but allow them to enter spaces that men do not traditionally occupy. Dan, though, remains incomplete without Cam, just as Vincent is unthinkable without Ellen. These two couples balance themselves in perfect harmony, comfort versus fervor, kindness versus anger. The male characters don feminine traits, the female characters inhabit masculine fields. When he thinks of the lives of his two daughters, he is not just ruminating about the past and his attempts to shield them, though not always effectively, from Ellen's anger. He also tries to look from their perspective and acknowledges the damage done to them. That makes him apologetic, thus inscribing him into a feminine position, "He wished that he could tell her that, 'We tried but we didn't love you enough. We did what we could at the time'" (Gordon 276). His apology is provoked by his realization of their de-feminized and de-humanized looks, "Magdalene, deformed now, with her missing breasts. Her drinking" and Theresa, "The furious stiff hair. The tight lips, lightly colored in. The nails that longed to tear, polished bright pink" (Gordon 276). Again, Gordon externalizes her characters' mental anguish into physical deformity, making it literal, pertaining to the body and visible, which enhances Vincent's guilt and compassion. Vincent's overall daily routine takes a dramatic, feminine turn after his retirement, "his life took on the rhythm of a woman's. Seasons, meals, the house itself became important" (Gordon 306).

In contrast to Vincent, Dan manages to maintain a relationship with his daughters. The fact that he has his misgivings about them, thinking of them in terms of loss and

independence describes him as a new type of concerned father, "He had tried to make them not feel tied to him, to keep the passion of his yearning for them secret from them" (Gordon 347). Dan's body, just like Vincent's, provides a shelter for his daughters, a safety space similar to the maternal hug of the typical renaissance Madonna. The scene with the dying Ellen contradicts cultural stereotypes of seeking refuge in the protectiveness of the mother from a threatening force, usually identified with masculine aggressiveness. Dan does not bear likeness with a belligerent knight in shining armor but with a shelter, traditionally ascribed to femininity. When Darci and Staci are frightened by the encounter with their delusional great grandmother, they seek their father's physical reassurance. Here the threat comes from an ominous femininity and Darci's first reaction is an impulse to turn to Dan's body, "She wants to burrow in her father's large, safe body. She wants to turn away from her grandmother, with her clenched gums and her cursing nobody can understand, and run to her father's arms, saying, as if she were the child she doesn't want to be, 'Save me. Save me from this.' But she knows she must not" (Gordon 353). Drawn between the desire to hide and to face grim reality, Darci oscillates between childhood and adulthood; the father's sympathetic presence helps her make the mature choice. Dan's benign disposition and comforting physicality are enhanced by the contrast with Valerie's thin body and rational attitude to maternity, "She sees herself a skeleton – functional, dry. She had produced two children freakishly, the goose who laid, because it had been called for, golden eggs" (Gordon 195).

Paternal care in Dan's case is stretched to include preparing food for his daughters, an activity traditionally connected with maternal functions, which is another

indication of the changing notions of masculinity in a dynamic world in which divorce causes its reinscription. Entertaining the kids in Disney World, a conventional paternal activity, is enveloped in a feminine small talk between the new generation of fathers, racially diverse, transgressing the boundaries of masculinity and allowing Gordon to show the tension and discrepancy between cultural layers and new social events that dramatically change the established positions in the family. "These men who in any other setting would have fallen within minutes into insult or tense silence made sympathetic comments to each other on the weather, the scandalous price of the drinks. They pointed out to one another the locations of the bathrooms. Failure in the company of failures, they became kinder. Almost womanly, they shared domestic troubles; they gave advice" (Gordon 177). This quotation perfectly addresses the way in which a private issue becomes public and is further internalized and critically analyzed by the male protagonist, "I simulate the idea of the good, caring man" (Gordon 349), thus demonstrating his uncertainty in occupying a liminal space which causes him to rethink his complicated roles in the family as a father, ex-husband, and lover.

On the scale of domesticity, Ira and Kevin represent different aspects of it. They cook for their beloved, they entertain them with stories, and, just like Vincent and Dan, they are always ready to listen. What Kristeva finds to be one of the most striking characteristics of the Virgin Mother within the patriarchal order, her representation as an ear and a breast, as a listener and a feeder, is central for these two male characters. Yet they are not marginalized but inhabit Cam and Magdalene's worlds as indispensable partners.

Ira fills the image of the perfect lover for a business-like woman: available, soothing, compassionate, spoiling, “He gives her water he holds her head to drink as if she were an invalid. He hands her the small pieces of food, piece by piece. So that, when the dishes are empty, she has already left him. He does this for her, lets her leave him first. It’s his house, she has all the life she must go back to” (Gordon 373). Of all the male characters in *The Other Side*, Ira is the only one whose physicality is described not through the body but through his comforting impact on Cam and his indulging attitude. The only physical description of him comes from a disapproving Dan, “comic Ira, white and fat” (Gordon 368). Though his virility is by no means doubtful, Ira, in many ways, represents the wise confidant, always available and cooking, always positioned in a home, a character, which, altogether, obtains traditional characteristics of femininity. Yet for Cam he is also a conflated image of the parent(s) she has never had.

This connection is reciprocal to Kevin’s attitude to Magdalene as an incarnation of the glamorous mother so different from his own, and, respectively, Kevin for Magdalene “had become [...] the child she had always wanted” (Gordon 171). If for Ira the domestic is the home turned into an intimate space for two lovers, for Kevin, however, it is a triumph of interior design, “So together Magdalene and Kevin created a place which meant to do homage to sex by replacing the act of sex with its effects and its surroundings” (Gordon 170). Kevin’s leaning towards femininity, underlined by his homosexuality, finds expression in his partnership with Magdalene in the hair styling salon and his preoccupation with elegance, “they were, in addition, both possessed of bodily consciousness.” The domestic, in this case, pertains to the glamorous in the house.

Another example of crossing boundaries between masculinity and femininity is Laura's complex attitude to Jimmy Cogan. They share a birthday that ties a special bond between them, an invisible umbilical cord which binds them, at first glance, into a mother/son relationship. Howard uses this coincidence to obtain two purposes: to bring the two characters closer together, giving a new dimension of the feminine/masculine dyad, and to start off Jimmy's story, basically told by Laura, the kindred spirit. Telling Jim's life story disentangles several narratives that make the family history; thus the personal leads to the private which, in its turn, flows into the public: a chronicle of two neighborhoods in Boston and New York of the late 60s of the twentieth century.

In many ways Jim brings the memory of Robert to Laura: he is approximately the same age as her brother before he died, he is caught in a similar dilemma that will crucially change his life. He also makes Laura remember the past and re-live that part of it which concerns her relationship with her brother so that she can come to terms with it. For Laura Jim is consequently and simultaneously a surrogate son, a memory of the adolescent lover she never really had, and the brother she lost. The family situation that brings them together meets two people in a life crisis which at the end of the novel is more or less resolved: Jim makes the mature decision of facing the consequences of his deed and Laura goes on with her life a person liberated from the burden of the past. In certain ways, it is Laura who is relocated and who slips into her brother's world through his diary to experience it from his viewpoint. For Jimmy, it is not just a mutual exchange of stories, but an exploration of the world of femininity outside the boundaries of the nuclear family. He has his initiation to the sphere of the intimate through Shelley; through

Laura he gets in touch with adulthood from a female perspective. The complexity of these relations causes the characters to adopt a more flexible attitude in evaluating the past, their anxieties and goals, and finally brings them to a resolution of their life crisis.

All the relationships discussed in this chapter reveal different stages and dimensions of the process of relocation and reinscription of the feminine and the masculine in *Before My Time* and *The Other Side*. They demonstrate the performativity of the maternal by the male characters through two of the Kristevan synecdoches, the ear and the breast, translated as compassionate listening and nurturing, that in these texts characterize the fathers and their tangible physicality.

## CHAPTER V

### CONCLUSION: WRITING HER STORY

What Gordon and Howard present in their novels is the double-bind in which Irish American women of different generations find themselves in the late twentieth century: belonging to a minority that is still considered an Other due to its Catholicism and being marginalized in the symbolic order through language. Both texts defy and try to destabilize it in three major ways: by writing the abject as the maternal body, by positioning the mother/daughter relations centrally, and by disjoining the maternal from the feminine. Turning to the abject allows the writers to claim the primal language of drives and rhythms of the pre-symbolic stage by writing the body of the mother and literalizing the figurative language of the father. Writing about women's sexual drives, gynecological problems, fear, and jouissance, Howard and Gordon open the closet of an Irish femininity repressed by the Catholic ideal of the benign mother that fully occupies the sphere of the private. Liberated sexuality, evaluation of the past from a feminist perspective, claiming a life not subordinated to traditional maternity are themes that they further explore in their other novels.

Howard devises a scale that designates the personal from the private and the public, making it the pivotal pole for her main character in *Before My Time*. This scale has been instrumental for discussing both hers and Gordon's text that provide so many

instances of the dynamics that sway the characters from one domain to another, privileging them according to the circumstantial demands of the narrative. This fluidity of choice defies the image of the ideal Catholic mother that is unthreatening to the patriarchal symbolic order which positions her solely in the sphere of the private. Gordon and Howard find a subversive way to relocate and reinscribe women's experience in Irish America by making their female characters the speaking subjects of the narrative.

In *Before My Time* the family history is wrapped up by Laura whose narrative voice is most distinct and with whose evaluations and judgments the reader is inclined to identify. The whole process of storytelling, however, is provoked by Jimmy who in this relationship is an interviewer. It is her story and her brother's story, told by her: "I've made up the mystery about my brother. It's only a story and I guess it's time" (Howard 94). Later Jimmy becomes one of the co-narrators because storytelling is not simply an exchange but also a clash of memories and ideas. "'My stories against your stories,' I said to him" (Howard 51). Significantly enough, the preposition is not "for" but "against" which implies a certain rivalry: whose story is better, whose story is truer? A similar scheme is at work in *The Other Side*: all the members of this large family are given a narrative voice but their revision of the past is triggered by an event that threatens to leave the family lame – the death of the matriarch. The actual storytellers are discussed by Cam,

In her family, the storytellers had been women: her grandmother, her aunt Theresa, herself. The stories were always linked to judgment; they were correctives, proofs, signs that someone in the world had thought too much of himself, the storyteller would show how. This amused Cam in her

grandmother, but she dreaded it in her aunt Theresa, and she feared that she herself shared the qualities of her aunt's stytic heart. She understood the pleasures of judgment, the taste for condemnation like a taste for salt. A racial trait, she guessed, of preserving, self-preserving Irish women. She'd seen them thrive on judgment, finding in it nutrition, healing, the reward for hours of exhaustion, and for years of self-control. (Gordon 56-57)

From this viewpoint the women's voices in storytelling become means of expression, creative acts, linking personal judgment with public experience. They are also Foucauldian nets of power that embrace their audience in order to control it. On the scale, provided by Howard in *Before My Time*, differentiating between a woman's private, personal, and public life (respectively nuclear family, interests and self-fulfillment, and community), storytelling occupies the personal realm that is both intimate and seeking public appreciation. Gordon, however, almost immediately provides an alternative storytelling, a counterpoint to the woman's reach for intoxicating power through words, "But Ira's stories weren't tied to judgment. They were surprised, bemused descriptions of the world" (57).

What entwines the two novels, apart from the common themes and concerns, is a dialogic relation: *Before My Time* posits the question about the personal goal of a female intellectual in the early 70s and *The Other Side* provides a possible answer to it by fulfilling a mega project in the late 80s of the twentieth century - writing the story of five generations of Irish American women, bound together by family ties.

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