



UNIVERSITETET I AGDER

Reclaiming Authorship

A Thematic Approach to the Poetry of Elise Cowen

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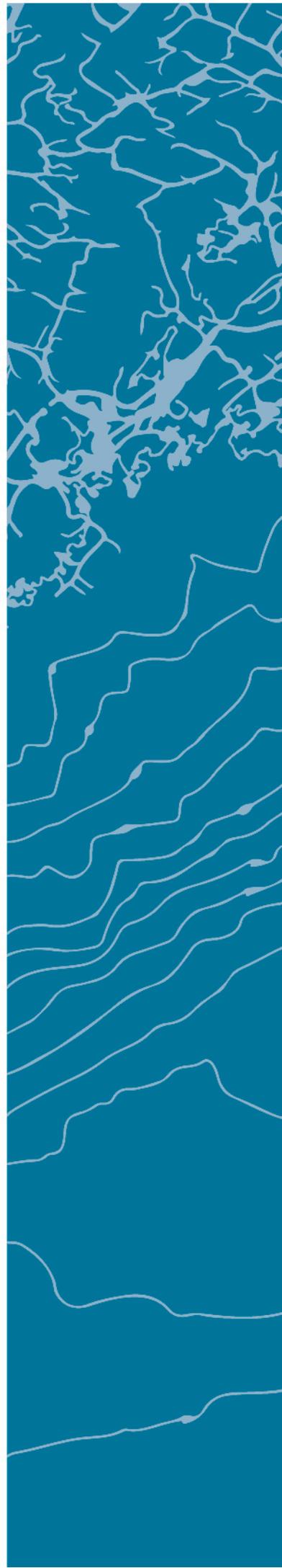
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1. Introduction

Seldom has an integral figure of such a vastly explored literary movement as the Beat Generation been as neglected as Elise Cowen. She had proclaimed her own ‘nothingness,’ a sense of self-worth that first and foremost transpired from her middle name Nada, but equally mirrors her absence in the Beat canon today. One would assume, based on the extensive publication of critical literature, biography, and the mythology’s entry into Hollywood, that the canon would by now be exhausted of its most prime material, but it equally begs the question of its homogeneity and the circular roadmap which seemingly every Beat scholar has followed since its inception. Integral is also word fueled by both recognition and frequency of appearance, neither of which typify anything that has been written or said about Elise Cowen. But in the rather small, tight-knit Beat community, she was a figure everyone seemed to know, yet no one could quite figure out.

Contrary to canonical descriptions, reading Elise Cowen’s work reveals that she was very much a poet in her own right: compatible with the content and form of Beat poetry, yet original in her poetical commitment to metaphysical, proto-feminist, and critical responses to religious, gender, and psychic conflicts. Critical study of her poetry affirms that she was never the mediocre writer she claimed to be, but an original poet: prolific in her craft, yet undermined by literary and societal masculine ascendancy. These very same forces came to marginalize her both biographically and textually, and her brief romantic tenure with Ginsberg, psychiatric institutionalization, and eventual suicide, would all ensue her ill-famed legacy as the ‘mad-girlfriend’ professed by most Beat biographers.¹

The predicament of Elise Cowen’s canonical absence, not only from a biographical point of view, but more importantly from textual exploration, is best answered by a quick

¹ See Trigilio (2002) 119-21; (2014) xiii-xv; Johnson (1983), especially chapter 5 and 6; Skir (1970).

survey of literature. We know very little about Cowen's creative output. The noticeable lack of material is fruitful in yielding a sense of novelty in regard to interpretation yet daunting in its apparent limitations. Cowen's entire poetic legacy is comprised of a sparse ninety-one poems: a mixture of drafts, fragments, and completed poems that overlap and intertwine from preliminary to final form. The material left for posterity is minimal, and the frame of reference is fragmentary at best; the framework for reading Cowen has reputedly been deficient in critical methodology as biography has taken precedence. The fabric of her biography has in many ways been the mirror image of her fractional authorial output, and its finite form, especially in regard to the work unaccounted for, cannot be stressed enough.

Following Cowen's suicide in 1962, most of her work was destroyed. Her parents, who were ill at ease with its content, perplexed and startled by their daughter's drug-use and bisexuality, had their neighbors burn her notebooks and typescripts. No source material is fully able to clarify the number of notebooks that were lost, but the general consensus seems to be that Cowen had been writing for most of her short adult life. Luckily, Irving Rosenthal, a former Chicago Review editor, had lived on and off with Cowen in 1961. One notebook had been left behind in his apartment. This notebook was given to Leo Skir, and later published in its entirety by Tony Trigilio in 2014.

What we know about Elise Cowen comes predominantly from Joyce Johnson's novel *Minor Characters* (1983), *Elise Cowen: A Brief Memoir of the Fifties* (1970) written by Leo Skir and later republished in Brenda Knight's *Women of the Beat Generation* (1996), and the article "Who Writes? Reading Elise Cowen's Poetry" by Tony Trigilio in Ronna C. Johnson and Nancy M. Grace's *Girls Who Wore Black: Women Writing the Beat Generation* (2002). Apart from the works mentioned, and to some extent Joyce Johnson's semi-autobiographical novel *Come and Join the Dance* (1962), Cowen's poetic legacy now rests entirely with the Tony Trigilio edited *Elise Cowen: Poems & Fragments* (2014). All poems cited, and in some

cases Trigilio's editorial notes, will all come from this collection, which serves as the thesis' primary source material.

While a great deal of debt is owed to Skir for preserving Cowen's poetry, Trigilio points out that "his possessiveness, claiming copyright ownership as he did for nearly five decades" considerably limited "access to her work" (2014, xvi). It was not until Trigilio discovered that this copyright had originally been given to Cowen's immediate family, and then to Ellen Nash, Cowen's cousin, that work on his collection could fully commence. Previous publications of Cowen's poetry, both in literary magazines as in Beat anthologies, had been somewhat inconsistent with the original texts. Skir had typed up her poems into his own typescript, and Trigilio himself notes that "I relied on a photocopy-of-a-photocopy of Skir's typescript of the original notebook—not the original notebook itself" (xvi) when writing "Who Writes? [...]" for the Johnson/Grace anthology. Hence, the foremost critical paper on her work, along with everything else published prior to 2014, contained textual variations and discrepancies from Cowen's own words. First now, fifty-six years after Cowen's passing, can we begin to reclaim an authorship that for decades was obscured by biography, and was as enigmatic as the uncertainty over its copyright. The poems in *Elise Cowen: Poems & Fragments* are believed to have been written from Fall 1959 through Spring 1960.

*

Elise Cowen was born in 1933 and grew up in Washington Heights, New York. She had no siblings and was "born to a relatively well-off family in Long Island who were given to high-strung histrionics interspersed with little attempts at normalcy" (Knight, 141). She attended Barnard College, and through her philosophy professor and lover, Donald Cook, she was introduced to Allen Ginsberg. Ginsberg was a former classmate of Cook's, and it was also Cook who introduced Cowen "to the avant-garde jazz and writing communities that were touchstones of Beat Experience" (Trigilio, 2014, xiii). Knight describes how in Ginsberg,

“Elise recognized her twin soul” (142), and Ginsberg, on advice from his psychoanalyst, dated Cowen as a heterosexual experiment. Although their relationship broke off when Ginsberg moved to San Francisco in January 1954, her friends, Joyce Johnson writes, would “gang up on [her] and tease her about her hang-up on Allen, whom she hasn’t even seen for a year and a half” (91). Their friendship nonetheless prevailed beyond their brief relationship in 1953, and according to Skir, Ginsberg even got her an apartment a floor above his, on East Second Street in New York, after his return from Europe in 1959 (155).

In 1957 Cowen moved to San Francisco after being fired from a script job at ABC. During her stay she undergoes a psychiatric abortion. The circumstances and details are vague but are accounted for in both Johnson’s novel and Skir’s memoir. Upon her return to New York a year later she lives with Skir, and in the summer of 1958 she moves in with Johnson. Elise meets Berkley native Keith Gibbs and by fall that same year they move back to the Bay area. She returns to New York in 1959 and writes what is most likely the poems of her one surviving notebook.

In 1961, “Ginsberg and Orlovsky leave for a trip to India. Cowen is hurt that he does not ask her to accompany them” (Trigilio, 2014, 168). A few months later Cowen experiences symptoms of paranoia and schizophrenia, and is admitted to Bellevue Psychiatric Hospital. She is later transferred to Hillside Hospital, a private facility on Long Island, and during the last year of her life suffers from extreme paranoia and auditory hallucinations. Cowen commits suicide on February 27, 1962 by jumping out of her parents’ seventh-floor apartment window.

Cowen has been described as having followed Ginsberg uncritically. When Ginsberg met his life partner Peter Orlovsky, “Cowen began dating Carol Hiller, with who she eventually would share an apartment” (Trigilio, 2014, xiii). In Johnson’s novel, as in Skir’s memoir, Carrol is referred to as Sheila, and “in loving Sheila, Elise is loving Allen too”

(Johnson, 92). “Yet there’s something between Allen and my friend Elise,” Johnson writes, “that instant knowing which can exist like a mysterious current between two people” (75) and “[from] then until the time she died, her world was Allen” (Skir, 155).

“Most of what we have come to know about Cowen,” Trigilio writes, “is through the oversimplified account of unrequited love that has become the master narrative of her complicated relationship with Ginsberg” (2014, xiv). One would be hard pressed to dismiss Ginsberg’s influence on Elise Cowen altogether. It is clear from both Trigilio’s writing, as that of Johnson and Skir, that Ginsberg played an important role in how Cowen came to define herself outside of the life in which she grew up; “[...] outside the focus of her parent’s rages” (Knight, 141). “When he was interested in Zen, so was she. When he became interested in Chassidism, so did she. Did he drink mocha coffee? So drank she” (Skir, 155), but in spite of this apparent fact, it is critical to stress the singularity of this narrative.

In *Minor Characters*, Johnson recalls a New Year’s Eve party at Lucien Carr’s apartment in which Cowen’s name “seemed to give him great amusement. Ellipse, he called her. Or Eclipse. ‘Well now, Eclipse, what’ll you have?’” (125). Carr’s irreverent demeanor is probably one of the more quoted Cowen-related paragraphs in Johnson’s novel due to the power of analogy. While I recognize the importance of both Johnson and Skir’s accounts in defining a poet we know so little about, they also “[de-emphasize] Cowen’s development as a poet in [their] discussion of Cowen’s relationship with Ginsberg” (Trigilio, 2002, 120). Consequently, Elise Cowen has remained synonymous with the “mad girlfriend-poet and typist of ‘Kaddish,’ ”(120) or “one of Ginsberg’s admirers,” as James Campbell recently called her, in his article “Ginsberg, Kerouac and Burroughs: celebrating the Beats in Paris” for *The Guardian* (09.07.2016), that is, for those who know about her at all.

While Leo Skir was able to publish some of Cowen’s poems “to *The Ladder* [...] several small literary magazines” (Knight, 143) and “various journals from 1964 to 1966 [...]

Beat commentators have approached her work and life with seemingly contradictory purposes” (Trigilio, 2002, 120). While her collected poems weren’t published until 2014, there were still poems from Skir’s manuscript that had been made available and had been so for decades. Her suicide, as Johnson mentions, had “made Elise mythic briefly” (258), and “the beauty of the written lines that she could see and I could see but neither of us could see in her,” which following Cowen’s death, Ginsberg and Lucien Carr wrote in a 1964 essay for *City Lights Journal*, “confessed how deeply the Beat community had underestimated her” (Trigilio, 2014, xv). While both Carr and Ginsberg, as well as Skir, recognized, if not half-heartedly came to acknowledged Cowen’s poetic potential, Cowen’s canonical invisibility is mainly a product of Beat biographers’ unwillingness to examine her poetry. Trigilio elaborates that “[in] accounts such as these, Cowen the poet is eclipsed by Ginsberg: she lives in his shadow and her writing is superseded to the extent that her work is mentioned only as a cipher to further understand Ginsberg’s.” (2002, 121).

The Beat mythology, how it is read and told to be read, has in many ways remained a product of its time. In “Mapping Woman Beat Writers,” in *Breaking the Rule of Cool: Interviewing and Reading Woman Beat Writers* (2007), Ronna C. Johnson writes that “[the] literature produced by the canonical male Beat writers has always assumed the presence of women Beats by the refusal to recognize them” (12). While the Beats may have rebelled against the cultural norms of middle class society, with issues of gender and sexuality at the forefront of their cause, the lineage of Beat scholarship has been explicitly patriarchal. Its homogeneity has mainly been a reflection of the male Beats own indifference to women writers, which is epitomized by Ginsberg who once asked, “Is it our fault that there weren’t any women of genius in the group?” (qtd. in Morgan, 616). Progressive contextualization of the movement has at some point come to a standstill. Cultivation of biography, of the established figures and legends, was favored at the expense of an expanding poetic lineage.

The next step was obviously bound to be a form of micro-analysis that would fit the criteria of the established Beat mythology; a poetic and anthropological study of the milieu's most prominent characters.

“Beat scholarship seems prone to biographical overextension,” Trigilio writes, and argues that it is “no doubt caused by the eminent marketability of Beat biography as quest literature and as literature of self-discovery” (2002, 137-38). Cowen can somewhat be placed in this category, but the lack of information concerning Cowen's own life would also suggest that her poetry does not lend itself to a-typical readings of Beat poetry. However, it is clear that a reading of Cowen as a poet in her own right has come at the expense of secondary biography; indeed, textual readings of her poetry have been greatly overshadowed by the need to define her place in Ginsberg, Johnson and even Skir's life. Very little has been discussed the other way around. Consequently, we need to define the role of author biography in reading Cowen's poetry.

Trigilio argues a Foucauldian perspective in “negotiating the tension between biography and textuality in critical responses to Cowen” (122). He continues: “Examining literary works with a greater emphasis on [...] ‘author function’ [...] while preserving the subjectivity of their authors to some extent, elevates the responsibility of Beat scholarship from transcription of biographical data [...] to the examination of the cultural work [...]” itself (122). As a retaliation to the issues undermining textuality, it is tempting to adopt Roland Barthes' phrase ‘death of the author’ to allow all effort to be put towards the interplay of language and signs in Cowen's poetry. But it becomes clear, especially considering Beat scholarship, which in many ways relies upon foreknowledge of norms, literary history, and the socio-political climate of the time and society in which it was written, that a disregard for biography will severely devalue Cowen's own poetic voice. While Barthes' “de-centering of authorial mastery” (122-23) might suggest otherwise, his “negation of critical markers of identity [...]

offers no productive point of convergence with feminist studies [...]” (122) or Beat scholarship. Whatever the position assumed, in regard to critical theory, even if Barthes is entirely discarded as a solution, the space between biography and textuality can be equally important as it is polarizing.

Instead of arguing for-or-against its inclusion or exclusion, I believe the question of how author biography is treated in direct relation to the work itself, is of better service in providing a vocabulary for this negotiation. It is not how much or little space is left between the text and its author, but the value of the information presented. While the author function is “[far] from offering a solution” (324) as Foucault said in his 1969 lecture “What is an Author?” it can, as Trigilio writes, “serve as a guide to Cowen’s reconsiderations of subjectivity and selfhood in her poetry” (2002, 124), and its co-dependent relationship with her biography.

Foucault explains that “the link between a proper name and the individual being named and the link between an author’s name and that which it names are not isomorphous and do not function in the same way” (325) His clarification of its differences ties in with the valuation of biography and how it may, or won’t, affect a poetic reading:

The disclosure that Shakespeare was not born in the house that tourists now visit would not modify the functioning of the author’s name, but, if it were proved that he had not written the sonnets that we attribute to him, this would constitute a significant change and affect the manner in which the author’s name functions. (325)

Equivalently, Skir’s remark that Cowen suffered from trench mouth would not alter our perception of her poetry, despite the slight inflammation of character, or ‘author’s name.’ But with knowledge that “Cowen read deeply in Western and Asian religious traditions” (Trigilio, 2014, xix) one might be inclined to approach her work from an angle, and this *would* change the function of the author’s name in relation to the text.

Because Beat poetry, especially if one considers Ginsberg’s “Howl,” has for decades

been a product of what one might call ‘classroom-dissection’ in an effort to unearth its dense layers of imagery: the elements of the author biography—as in identity, history, political climate, and so forth—is in many ways equally important to the poetic experience. John Tytell’s *Naked Angels* (1976) could to a greater extent fall under this category, in which the writings of Kerouac, Ginsberg and Burroughs are carefully dissected and analyzed in relation to a wide array of source material: from seemingly casual letters of correspondence to known and unknown influences superimposed on the perceived meaning of poems like “Wichita Vortex Sutra”:

This is a potential that Ginsberg first commemorated in *Kaddish*’s ‘Igny,’ an ‘angel in comical form’ that attends to life with passionate intensity, with the social concerns of Blake and Whitman, with the abandon of Rimbaud, and the native American surrealistic antics and anarchistic tactics exemplified by the Marx Brothers (as in Kerouac’s poem, “To Harpo Marx” [...]) (Tytell, 248)

Because the Beat Generation does not really pertain to a generation per se, but a rather small milieu of American avant-garde artists in which the word ‘Generation’ is strictly referring to the time in which the movement arose, the vocabulary imposed by its writers is all but contemporary. As a result, the apparent need to dissect and overanalyze is merely heightened by the modern-reader, who is both imitating the analysis of his precursors, and lacking unmediated experience with the origin of the poetry’s denotations and language. This is the root of the dilemma concerning biographical overextension.

In critical studies of Beat poetry, a term that often comes up is intertextuality. Reading Cowen’s poetry, like in reading most Beat writing, could therefore be assumed to require a certain level of intertextual analysis. Susan Stanford Friedman, in the article “Weavings: Intertextuality and the (Re)Birth of the Author” in Jay Clayton and Eric Rothstein’s *Influence and Intertextuality in Literary History* (2009) explains Julia Kristeva’s original conception of

intertextualité as “[the] concept that proposes text as a dynamic site in which relational processes and practices are the focus of analysis” (147), of which Kristeva herself says that “[any] texts is constructed as a mosaic of quotations” (qtd. in Friedman, 147). Kristeva’s approach to the intertextual reading of poetic language reveals what she calls translinguistic doubleness, which “situates texts within history and society, which are then seen as texts read by the writer, and into which he inserts himself by rewriting them” (147). Although intertextuality, as I have come to define it, seems more than an adequate solution, and also apt to Foucault’s discussion of biography’s influence on the author function, “the concluding sections of [Kristeva’s] ‘Word, Dialogue, and Novel’ efficiently eliminate the writer from the analysis of intertextuality” (147-48).

The problem that occurs in directly applying Kristeva’s form of intertextuality to Cowen’s poetry lies within its binary construction of reading and writing. The anticipation of “the knot that ties intertextuality with the death of the author” (148) creates a dividing line between the act of reading and the act of writing, as two separate spheres of intertextual methodology. Friedman notes that “[the] ‘death of the author’ — and with ‘him,’ the death of origin, meaning, referentiality — makes possible the transformation of ‘the work’ into ‘Text’” (149), but in this case we are talking about more than just the negligence of biography. Cowen herself enforces a sort of intertextual approach in re-writing narratives via a translinguistic doubleness. But because some of the original narratives are so deeply embedded within western culture, their disappearance less than a century after Cowen’s death, seem impossible.

Another problem is the differentiation of ‘the work’ and ‘text’ as disclosing the act of re-writing a narrative into an intertext as different from the intertext perceived by the reader. In this case, intertextuality, in its strictest sense, cannot be applied as a poetic strategy in Cowen’s work. While the meaning of the original texts is not dependent on ‘the work,’ the new ‘text’ as an “absorption and transformation” (147) of the original texts—the re-conceived

meaning of the doubleness—is entirely dependent on the author’s awareness of the origin and influence of its constituents. Edward S. Robinson, in *Shift Linguals: Cut-up Narratives from William S. Burroughs to the Present* (2011), explains that “intertextuality has become a key facet of literature [...] with fragmentation, genre cross-pollination and the incorporation and adaptation of existing ‘texts’ informing the formulation of much ‘postmodern’ work” (5). Clayton and Rothstein also label intertextuality as a rather “general term” that works from a “broad definition of influence” (3). It becomes clear that despite the commonplace of intertextuality in readings of Beat poetry, its definition is too vague, especially when dealing with a writer such as Cowen.

Influence is also a concept that Cowen portrays as double-edged. In the poem “I Took the Skins of Corpses,” specifically, influence is illustrated through a slow building analogy of an author devoid of originality. Paradoxically, influence as means for creativity is equally observed by the speaker as the reason for her inability to produce original writing. In this case, exclusion of biography would be ill-advised as it lends itself to Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar’s concept of anxiety-of-authorship, which will be further discussed in the thesis’ last chapter.

As a result, what one might consider intertextual strategies in Cowen’s poetry, is best served by a term that does not harbor doubt in relation to the treatment of biography, origin or influence. Friedman asserts that “intertextuality [has] not been and cannot be kept pure” and Kristeva’s own use of Mikhail Bakhtin in the creation of intertextuality “embodies the principles of influence”: “Not only is he the author of his ideas [...] but her text also testifies to the authority of his influence on her” (154). While the strategy of re-writing narratives is not prominent throughout all of Cowen’s poetry, it does occur, and is one of her main “affinities with the form and content of Beat Generation literature” (Trigilio, 2014, xix).

Although intertextuality could be a useful tool in developing reading strategies for

Cowen's poetry, a critical study of her work *will* require attention to biography. This is not only because biographical overextension appears synonymous with Beat scholarship and critical studies of writers like Ginsberg, and thus it must be appropriated, but due to the complexity of its apparent limitations. While this may sound paradoxical, the treatment of the Ginsberg/Cowen relationship in general should suffice in outlining the problem.

To avoid further confusion, I have opted to use parallelism, and antithetic parallelism in particular, to explore Cowen's most dense imagery. This will allow, in keeping with the essence of intertextuality's doubleness, a diversion from the ambivalent relationship it shares with biography and the author function. It will also lessen the weight put on biographical information without dismissing it. Thus, the main focus will continuously remain with the juxtaposition and amalgamation of thematics within her poetic language. The objective is an analysis that is firstly, attentive to textuality, and second, attentive to biographical detail in defining the text within the cultural climate it was written. The field of influence should be carefully considered in relation to how it may serve the text, and only be used if the author function is deemed necessary to comprehend its meaning.

On the level of language, most of Cowen's poetry is short and compact, rarely exceeding eighteen lines in length. When they do, they often stretch over two to three pages and pay little attention to fixed metre, stanza length, or repetitive rules and structures. The poetic discourse is most often made coherent by clever use of enjambment, figurative imagery, and the strength of Cowen's ability as a storyteller. My focus will mostly lie with her longer poems: those that exceed her short poems threefold, and those in the upper limit of (and slightly above) her average. These are, in my opinion, the poems that communicate the strongest sense of completion in form and content. While the themes of her poetry intermittently overlap, I will discuss her work from three different perspectives I regard central to her poetic voice. These are indeed re-workings of Trigilio's identification of

recurring motifs in Cowen's narrative arc, but "[no] taxonomy is ever complete" (2014, xix), so I believe these strategies of reading can be expanded upon significantly:

The first theme, *Death Lives*, is Cowen's poetic exploration of death-as-a-pathway. In poems like "Thank You for the Cool Stream of Air" and "Must I Move to Get Away from Killing You" Cowen integrates spirituality and ethereal symbolism into insects found in her domestic environment to redefine the reader's perception of death. Moths and cockroaches are frequent harbingers of human mortality in Cowen's poetry, and through them, death's archetypal associations are lessened in intensity if not completely removed.

The second theme, *The Air Shaft*, is Cowen's portrayal of the human psyche and its struggles in defining the innermost self. By placing her speaker in a world that appears two-sided, in which her real life and life's potential are designated to separate spheres, Cowen elaborates on pathways in which they intertwine: a continuum of the pathway-narrative in *Death Lives*, and the psychological conflict in adapting or rejecting postwar era's gender constructs and social norms. In "Third Day of Spring" or "From the Brown Brick Back Wall Bathroom," these issues are often outlined as revelatory in the speaker's awareness of the disconnection between life and potentiality, but are extended to a broader discussion on female originality, detachment, and literary influence in poems like "I Took the Skins of Corpses" or "Did I Go Mad in My Mother's Womb."

The last theme, *The Re-Write*, is Cowen's re-imagining of authority figures and the power they retain over the individual. The skill of her writing does not merely lie in the effort of pointing these issues out, but placing them as constructs of society, and then re-writing their narratives' grip over the material body and spiritual being. In poems such as "Dear God of the Bent Trees of Fifth Avenue" and "I Wanted a Cunt of Golden Pleasure," the speaker argues against religious authority's territorialization of the body by unifying different facets of desire as one ethereal experience. Cowen distrust religious language but does not transgress

it through displacement. Instead, she re-appropriates its performative qualities to revise it: a poetic narrative derived from western metaphysics, free sexual expression, Judeo-Christian discourse, and the esoteric mysticism of the Kabbalah.

These groupings are driven by thematic and narrative drift, and presents the premise of this thesis, which is to reclaim an authorship long obscured by gender bias and secondary biography. Critical analysis and commentary on Cowen's work is sorely needed, as limited source material has for decades obstructed "[...] graduate students [who] were writing theses on the Beats that included discussions of Cowen's poetry" (Trigilio, 2014, xvii). Ronna C. Johnson remarks that most woman Beat writers "have been in the unusual and provocative situation of being the agents of their own recovery projects" (11), which is probably best exemplified by the success of Joyce Johnson's *Minor Characters* (which won a National Book Critic's Circle Award in 1983), the travel writings and poetry of Janine Pommy Vega, or the memoirs and poetry of Hettie Jones, among others. Cowen was never in a position to do so herself, "[and], until recently, the few bibliographies of works by women Beat writers have been incomplete or inaccurate" (11). Reading women Beat writers "has meant to track dispersed, uncollected, and sometimes unpublished sources" (11), and even now, four years after the publication of Trigilio's collection, I have yet to find any substantial secondary source material regarding Cowen's work.

2. Death Lives

In reading Elise Cowen's poetry, the word 'death' is undeniably present throughout her notebook. There is a certain undertone of the macabre which permeate through its pages, and I come think of *Minor Characters* when Cowen said, "Can you imagine? And isn't it amazing that suicide is illegal when society is so indifferent to human life?" (Johnson, 65) after what was likely her "first known suicide attempt" in 1952 (Trigilio, 2014, 165). Her words to

Johnson continuously resurface throughout her discussion on death, and has a certain ad hoc rhetoric in the speaker's necessity to redefine its preconceived connotations.

Cowen's idea of death is that of an awakening, or a pathway to a new existence, in which the emblem of death takes on the form of the living. Thematically, Cowen puts emphasis on the spiritual symbolism of insects and objects of domesticity. Death-as-a-pathway is found in everything from a moth to a raincoat, and is further developed in Cowen's fascination with cockroaches. In *Death Lives*, I will mainly discuss "Thank You for the Cool Stream of Air," "Who Will Slap," "Death I'm Coming," "Must I Move to Get Away from Killing You," and "A Cockroach," which "dramatize Cowen's increasing attraction and repulsion to the subject of death" (Trigilio, xix).

In Cowen's notebook, "Thank You for the Cool Stream of Air" (Cowen, 97) is the poem that most clearly defines her perception of the moth as a spiritual entity of transgression. The poem describes a speaker who observes and comments on the insect as it enters her vicinity, and its re-appearance in other poems culminate in a larger network of symbolism, in which the moth itself figures as a life re-incarnated once death has lost its prepossessed connotations. The moth-imagery is first read as a personification of death itself, as the speaker bluntly states "Little moth / Death" (L4-5) upon seeing it. Cowen creates a narrative in which death is seemingly everywhere; the precarious nature of existence is placed "Six inches away from my pinky finger" (L3), and is something that is so close you could almost touch it; however, it is not the tension of life hanging by a thread which challenges our conception of our own mortality.

Cowen's moth-imagery in "Thank You [...]" is essentially nothing like one would usually perceive the subject of death in the western poetic tradition. As stated in the introduction, Cowen was quite taken with Asian religious traditions, as well as esoteric methods of Judaism, and this influence becomes readily apparent in her poetry. Our

apprehension of the moth-imagery changes abruptly when the speaker indicates a duplexity within it. Despite its “[...] grey wings” (L2) and the given gloom associated with its analogy, the speaker remarks that the moth is in fact “a butterfly of blue light” (L7). Cowen instills an image of death that is quite contrary to the reader’s initial conception; in “Thank You [...]” death is colored blue as the ocean and sky, and could metaphorically be read as an image of peace and serenity.

In the previous observation of death’s close proximity, the moth is more a reminder of death’s metaphysical presence than anything else: it functions as an intermediary whose “[...] cool stream of air” (L1) reveals its imminence and the speaker’s temporal existence.

However, I think Cowen purposely tries to make a point in her literal descriptions of the insect’s close proximity to the speaker, more so than in the previous observation of death being a few inches away. The moth itself takes on properties of metempsychosis, as life re-incarnated, and one could argue that the peace and serenity that death brings is not one of endless rest but a breath of fresh air, or a cool stream of air: its connotations being quite the opposite of respiratory failure.

However, the time interval that the moth and speaker simultaneously share also illustrates that life re-incarnated holds no guarantees for being better than the present, because figuratively, the moth also depicts a new life that mirrors her current situation. In “Sometimes in My Dungeon There Comes a Crawling Thing” (Cowen, 12), for instance, the narrator describes “A bristly caterpillar” (L3) with the potential of “A butterfly-to-be” (L4). She asks if it won’t be disappointed to find “That there’s no day to see” (L6) before presenting the idea that “If it becomes a moth [...]” (L7) she will be the only light present. However, the moth as a symbol of rebirth is equally a reminder of life’s potential, and what *could* be a pathway to happiness; to a butterfly of blue light.

Its re-appearance in “Death, You Little Grey Moth” (Cowen, 13), a short poem

comprised of two open couplets, and strikingly similar in voice and content to “Thank You [...],” supports such a reading. In “Death, You [...]”, the narrator also describes herself as “Cool” (L4) behind closed eyes, which relates both to the cool stream, which on a literal level in “Thank You [...]” describes the moth shifting a silent breeze towards the narrator’s cheek, and the speaker’s attention to the moth’s own duality. The butterfly of blue light operates metonymically in its relationship to the grey moth, but in relation to the speaker, it becomes a metaphor for metempsychosis, and brings a calming ‘cool’ over Cowen’s speaker. It would not be imprudent to assume that these poems were either written back to back, or one being the inspiration for the other. There are, however, no editorial notes in Trigilio’s collection that can confirm this.

Due to the fact that the speaker has already dismissed death as a Judeo-Christian narrative, and all its preconceived connotations, we can accept the physical embodiment of death as a living creature. In monotheistic religious-discourse, the metaphysical outcome of death is either heaven or hell, all based on moral excellence or vice. Because Cowen’s speaker views the moth as life re-incarnated, all demands of virtue from the perspective of the Church falls short. From a biographical perspective, for someone who most likely felt insecure about her own actions in relation to her birth-religion’s dogmatic restrictions, the moth would provide a much sought-after release. This also eradicates the notion of death as necrosis of the mind and soul, and adopts a line of thinking that shares a closer resemblance to Buddhism than Judaism or Christianity.

In “Who Will Slap” (Cowen, 98), the anxiety brought on by death’s uncertainty is efficiently executed by posing the entire poem in the form of a question, with no assured resolution in mind. The moth-imagery is absent, but the poem builds upon the two narratives derived from it: death, as we have come to see, is often romanticized by Cowen as means for a change rather than a means to an end, but what it actually brings is a conundrum her speaker

struggles to solve. On one end of the spectrum there are poems like “Thank You [...]” in which death’s re-written connotations pertain strongly to its desirability. The speaker in “Who Will Slap” on the other hand is far too concerned with death’s unpredictability to imagine the blue-butterfly-metaphor in “Thank You [...]” as a pathway to happiness. As mentioned earlier, considering the figurative representation of the moth, this anxiety seeps through in the latter as well, but it is not as prevalent a thought as it is in “Who Will Slap.” While this may be happenstance, it could also well be a reflection of Elise Cowen’s changing psyche and life situation.

The re-occurrence of the pronoun ‘who,’ in “Who will slap my backside” (L1) and “Who will close my eyes” (L3), suggests a longing feeling that is not present in either of the previously discussed poems. If we consider the first line as a sexual or romantic experience, the anxiety of not knowing “who will slap [her] backside” (L1) could stem from a moment of happiness in real life, possibly one that is hard to let go of. This is of course quite contrary to the situation described in her ‘dungeon,’ which is further embellished in the slightly humorous “You Are Not My Sunshine” (Cowen, 53): “The lizards here would bite you / The spiders bind you fast” (L5-6). We can therefore assume that Cowen’s own two-fold relationship to death, that of hope and anxiety, are mere products of her own measured happiness. The common ground is still what appears to be a fundamental belief in death as metempsychosis. The first two lines of “Who Will Slap” spell this out quite literally: “Who will slap my backside / When I am born again” (L1-2).

In “Death, I’m Coming” (Cowen, 105), Cowen’s reiterated idea of death-as-a-pathway is highlighted by the speaker who directly addresses it in personified form:

Death [...]

.....

I know you’ll be

at the subway station

loaded with galoshes, raincoat, umbrella, babushka (L1, 3-5)

The poem depicts a speaker who observes her own mortality in locations and objects, and seems to find comfort in its constant presence. The difficult idea of death is perhaps mitigated, if not compressed, into a “[...] single simple answer”(L6). It is incorruptible and will discard whatever makes the living unique. In a sense, it could be viewed as egalitarianism through death; a “Thoughtful killjoy of fingerprints” (L9) for the sake of a leveled field for all. But as an “Incorruptible institution” (L8), and by association a remark that accentuates the polarization between Cowen’s previous sentiments on the afterlife, and the dictatorial rhetoric of religious institutions, death is removed from the religious narrative altogether. One would assume, based on Cowen’s affiliation with the Beats, the influence of Ginsberg, and how their fight against existing power structures mirrored her inner struggles with religion and sexuality, that in her mind there were no such things as incorruptible institutions.

As a result, “Death, I’m Coming” echoes “Thank You [...]” and “Who Will Slap” in its allusion to death as a concept that is not constrained by redemptive language or religious expectations. However, due to the indirect nature of association, the narrative in “Death, I’m Coming” does not point in the direction of metempsychosis, but rather towards a reading of death as being all-encompassing. Also, unlike the uncertainty expressed in “Who Will Slap,” death in this particular poem appears to hold more guarantees. Cowen’s speaker appears surer in her assumptions; she knows where death is and what it holds. If Trigilio’s arrangement of her poetry is true to the notebook’s original chronology, we could assume, on account of her biography, that the topic had been pre-mediated and further developed.

The idea of death being loaded with galoshes and umbrellas induces an image of protection. In *Brolliology: A History of the Umbrella in Life and Literature* (2017), Marion Rankine explains that “shelter and protection are as ancient as umbrellas themselves, and feed

into the profound and mythological meaning once invested in the objects” (58). The umbrella, in particular, has throughout history been used both metaphorically and literally as an image of safety, protection, and defense. Cowen’s investment in Asian religious studies could attribute the reading of death as a protective umbrella to its “[...] cosmic significance [in Confucian texts]” because “chariot parasols acted as depictions of the universe itself” (60). Fittingly, if not pertinent to that point in particular, the poem ends in a soliloquy, reminiscing the words of someone hinting at a passage to heaven.

“If I crawled into your crack in the wall / [...] What would you & your dynasty do?” (L9,11) the speaker asks in “Must I Move to Get Away from Killing You” (Cowen, 56). She calls them “Angels” (L8); celestial intermediaries between herself and the afterlife; the assigned role of the cockroach. Its figurative function is essentially the same as the moth in “Thank You [...]” in that a seemingly meaningless insect is assigned spiritual attributes. The cockroaches are placed on a higher plane of existence with “[...] indifferent feet” that may “Tickle me to death [...]” (L12), but the level of uncertainty expressed in “Who Will Slap” is effectively its mirror image.

On a literal level, “Must I Move [...]” describes a speaker who questions whether she must relocate to mend a broken heart. Her frustrations culminate in a dialog that is first internal, but then abruptly directed toward the cockroaches in her apartment. Figuratively, the speaker draws a dividing line between these ‘angels’ and herself by the self-proclamation, “Four clumsy appendages, too dumb to talk” (L10), and repeatedly questions the possible outcomes of joining them:

Tickle me to death under your indifferent feet

Teach me to be a makeshift cockroach

Live of my flesh and use the bones for cockroach walls (L12-4)

In Cowen's poetry, the cockroach represents death-as-a-pathway that, similarly to the moth, inhabits figurative connotations pertaining to re-incarnation. While its lifespan is nowhere near the average human's, its near death-defying resilience to survival parallels Cowen's imagery. "Respect the cockroach centuries" (L4), she writes in "Keep Out of the Light" (Cowen, 55), because cockroaches are in a sense metaphorically eternal, and within that thought, Cowen's speaker finds a level of comfort that is not matched by western theology. The idea of life after death through re-incarnation is thereupon appropriate, but as in "Thank You [...]" or "Who Will Slap," paradise is not necessarily guaranteed. The speaker hence anxiously questions each conceivable outcome from crawling into the crack.

Cowen factors in this imagery in the latter part of "Must I Move [...]" as a reactionary response to the poem's subject; to the person she must move away from. Death becomes a type of escapism in which the speaker can leave her troubles behind, so she won't have to "[...] carry to Sutton Place in the back of my mind" (L2) or move "back to San Francisco ants" (L3). We know from Trigilio's editorial notes that "Carol Hiller had moved to Sutton Place [...] after the two had broken up" (2014, 144), so we can undoubtedly read it as a biographical extension of Cowen's own life. Her suicide is a biographical footprint that can be traced throughout *Death Lives*, "Must I Move [...]" included, and can easily overshadow the speaker's own voice of reasoning due to its taboo nature. But like the moth-imagery, death in "Must I Move [...]" is despite its uncertainty, a release equivalent to the cool stream of air, and unceasingly echoes Cowen's own words to Johnson following her suicide attempt in 1952.

In "A Cockroach" (Cowen, 14-5), the speaker expands upon the metempsychosis of the moth, which is now extended to the cockroach. The poem describes the speaker observing a cockroach who "Crept into / My Shoe" (L2-3) and proceeds to comment on its actions. While the cockroaches in "Must I Move [...]" are hidden, imagined as living inside a crack in the

wall, they are tangible and seemingly as attracted to the speaker in “A Cockroach” as the speaker is to them; on observing the close proximity of the insect, the speaker says “I crept my hand / In / After him” (L9-11). Similarly to how the moth paralleled the speaker’s life in “Thank You [...],” the speaker, as a biographical extension of Cowen, compares herself indirectly to the cockroach as “[...] bronze / And the Jews” (L14-5). Cowen mirrors the cockroach’s detrimental attributes as a pest to the history of Jewish persecution, and bronze as a common metal that is invariably below second best, which together interlink the speaker and cockroach as marginalized subjects and outcasts.

Marion Copeland’s *Cockroach* (2003) describes how scholars have become “sufficiently biocentric to acknowledge that [the] fictional cockroach [...] might be as much about cockroaches as about humans,” symbolically representing “those forced to survive on the underside and on the margins of dominant human cultures” (11). In “A Cockroach,” the speaker does not welcome the cockroach to use her shoe for a mere “[...] roadside rest” (L18) as a passer-by. She keeps it, highlighting its imperfection by saying “You’ve lost an antenna” (L24), which epitomizes its outcast-role as her insect facsimile. Copeland’s suggests that the cockroach-imagery’s dedication to “cleaning up the remains of the patriarchy” (11) would make it a worthy hero of twenty-first-century ecofeminism, but I would equally extend this to the feminist recovery projects in Beat literature. The cockroach-imagery parallels the metempsychosis of the moth in both its physical proximity to the speaker, as well their shared characteristics, and she treats it “seriously affectionately as a child” (L26).

Cowen’s vision of death is ultimately nothing like its a-typical western connotations. Her perpetual dealings with the subject matter is where her own fascination with suicide, as well as the Buddhist view of death, shine through the strongest. The moth and cockroach being her most vivid interpretations. While their function as intermediates, or metempsychosical apparitions of the afterlife, are often portrayed as no better than the

speaker's own reality, Cowen's poetic rhetoric in *Death Lives* is encapsulated in the last stanza of "Must I Move [...]":

Cockroaches

Prepare

I'm coming in (L15-7).

The common factor in all these poems is the portrayal of death as a life in itself. It is rather the death of the body than the death of the soul. The speaker and insect's shared need for attachment, or 'the single simple answer' are both pathways to a shared understanding of death as a place free from the soul's current physical embodiment. In Cowen's poetry, *Death lives*.

3. The Air Shaft

The adjacency of oppositional imagery can appear almost habitual to Elise Cowen's language when reading her work. On the surface they are contrastive elements, semantic connotations at variance, and parts of the making of a unique poetic voice. But as the discussion on death disclosed, the moth and the butterfly of blue light are if anything a method to reveal the binary nature of language. These opposing forces become a method to re-envision cultural constructs, authority and tradition, and is what I will later refer to as *The-Re-Write*. But to further understand Cowen's choice of direction, I believe one must look at what Trigilio calls her "frank portrayals of the psyche" (2014, xix). Not only because contrasting imagery is used to portray it, and give it depth, but because the situations and feelings described give way and encourage the re-imagining of ideas like desire and religion in other poems, while providing a continuity from *Death Lives*. Cowen's portrayal of her own psyche is often a form of observation of unfulfilled self-realization, and the struggles of the innermost self, adapting to, and/or, rejecting the conceits of existing power structures. These

issues are often characterized as being rooted in a sense of disconnection between real life and its full potential, and reveal themselves in juxtapositions and figurative pathways. My discussion will mainly center on “If I Never Saw the Snow Fall,” “Third Day of Spring,” “Hidden the Light,” “From the Brown Brick Back Wall Bathroom,” “The Steam Comes Up,” “Did I Go Mad in My Mother’s Womb,” and “I Took the Skins of Corpses.”

Within this imagery Cowen discusses both female originality and the establishment of the self. Trigilio writes that “Cowen was a poet committed to rendering her inner life with candor,” and like her gravitation towards the subject of death, Cowen was equally attracted to “[...] alternately idealistic and dark responses to psychic and familial conflict” (2014, xix). Her responses vary from one poem to the next, but the essence of *The Air Shaft* is Cowen’s rendering of the self in the face of cultural norms and constructs. The permutation of pathways fluctuates throughout Cowen’s notebook, and like death-as-a-pathway in *Death Lives*, the image of ‘the air shaft’ presents its own narrative arc. In spite of its dependence on the coexistence of poetry within the notebook to solidify its importance, it is not present throughout this entire chapter; Cowen also engages in more direct portrayals of gender constructs and female originality in which the titular air-shaft-imagery is unaccounted for. It does, however, initiate the pinnacle idea that is thematically unison throughout the chapter.

The air shaft first appears in “If I Never Saw the Snow Fall” (Cowen, 7), and shares a relationship with snow that very much equals the moth/death relationship in *Death Lives*. The poem portrays a speaker who ponders the appearance of spring snow and considers her interaction with it as “[...] a simple experiment” (L2). The speaker indicates that without the air shaft she would be unable to imagine “[...] spring snow falling” (L15):

Something finer perhaps

But not snow

Sugar & Salt

Powdered glass

Ash from cigarettes (L5-9)

This juxtaposition of imagery as attributing to different environments suggests a rhetoric that delineates the trauma of confinement. The air shaft becomes the intermediate between these spheres, or a pathway, that simultaneously offers hope as it emphasizes her abject solitude. Industrial produce like cigarette ash and powdered glass overshadows natural phenomena, and life's normalcy is made akin to a state of artificiality. Snow fall acts metaphorically as a life which the speaker dreads as much as she wants, which is made clear in line fourteen as she can only fathom the word "Thoughts" upon the realization of its presence.

The duality of Cowen's own life, as a Beat woman living in postwar America, provides the leeway needed to fully comprehend this realization. The expectations of postwar American's societal norms would leave much to be desired, yet Cowen struggled to find her voice within a community that was supposedly already liberated from its constructs. To the speaker, snow is a traveler, the "Little wanderers" that are both "specks in the [her] eye" and "Mote in your neighbors" (L11-2). The artificiality of the life she avoids, of life beyond the air shaft, reveals itself to be characteristic of her own reality. The syntactical ambiguity of the poem's final line "The next building has a face for brick" (L16) also disrupts the reader's expectation of a new-found clarity, being the only thought she could muster after her revelatory observation. In relation to Cowen's own life, and especially the lineage of Beat scholarship, "If I Never Saw the Snow Fall" depicts the pitfalls of gender roles in postwar American society. The life represented by the snow is thus very much the life of a woman, and the symbolic bond the speaker and her neighbors share, regardless of profession, sexual preference, or social circle.

"Third Day of Spring" (Cowen, 22) appears later in the notebook, and Trigilio suspects it to be a second draft of "If I Never Saw the Snow Fall" as "Cowen continued drafting the

poem in the margins of the notebook” (2014, 131). The speaker’s conflicting attraction to the snow is first introduced by the alliterative second line “Snow falling finer & faster,” whose words equally roll off the tongue as one would imagine snow falling across the horizon. Trigilio notes that in one of Cowen’s drafts the speaker proclaims, “Trying to learn snow falling / Which flake is best / I forget my sweater” (132), which indicates an attraction that is more predominant and direct than in “If I Never [...]” Notwithstanding its appeal, the speaker concludes that “I see for the first time that, there, every day / I don’t want to go out under those tiny things” (L10-11).

Comparatively to “If I Never [...],” the speaker observes the snow in relation to her neighbor who appears twice within the poem’s eighteen lines. Already in the first stanza, Cowen’s speaker suggests that “The neighbor could hang her wash / On telegraph wires” (L3-4), which in its surreality implies a distance between both subjects. In relation to Beat ethea, and how Cowen’s own choices defined her life, this distance is an implication of rejection that highlights the appreciable difference between her and her neighbor’s worlds. The image effectively transfers onto the speaker as a derisive remark, and not an actual suggestion, because in her mind the offbeat proposition of hanging clothes on telegraph wires during snowfall only highlights her view of their mismatched realities. When the image reoccurs, it is extended to “Telegraph wires and / Bridge cables [...]” (L8-9), and the neighbor is described as impractical. The speaker suggests a doubleness in implying that the impractical nature of drying fabric in snowy weather is an analogy for the impracticality of her neighbor’s life to hers. The artificiality of this norm constructed life, as in “If I Never [...],” is described as snow that is “Powdered glass or ash” (L12) and is best to be avoided.

Similarly to Cowen’s draft, the speaker’s wish in “Third Day [...]” to “[...] practice falling / That’s my pleasure” (L14-5) indicates that her relationship with snow has not escaped the ambivalence it amassed in “If I Never [...]” Due to its metaphorical properties of

denoting the woman's role, she is conditioned to practice it on account of her gender, and though she distrusts it, she cannot deny it. Denying it would be equal to denying her own existence, thus she finds pleasure in falling. Nevertheless, the act of practicing suggests that the speaker finds herself in state of rehearsal, unwilling to commit to her pre-defined societal role. Inside her own apartment there are "No people for it to fall on" (L16) and the snow itself can no longer be a metaphor for a life defined by gender constructs. Consequently, the speaker can practice falling as a re-defined metaphor for a re-defined self.

The air-shaft-imagery is once again the pathway to this observation, and as result, Cowen engages a discussion of unfulfilled self-realization in the wake of gender constructs. The image re-appears in several other poems which help define its mediating characteristics. In "You Stand In My Heart" (Cowen, 62) Cowen's speaker notes that "*The* is a regal word" (L8) because:

"In the"
 Is the
 secret shaft
 Where the space
 Between
 the snowflakes
 falls (L9-15)

"Sitting With You in the Kitchen" (Cowen, 23) elaborates by stating " 'The' is a beautiful, regal, perfect word" (L5). Coincidentally, these are both poems which Cowen most likely wrote with Ginsberg in mind, and her rhetoric is undoubtedly formed by her admiration for his intellect and individuality. We can assume that to the speaker, 'the' is beautiful on account of denotation and its definite quality. It specifies something particular and would coincide with the sense of self-worth Cowen most likely felt around Ginsberg and the Beats.

This accumulation of definitions brings us to “Hidden the Light” (Cowen, 24) in which the air-shaft-imagery is most profound yet entirely absent on a literal level. Cowen exploits the deceiving qualities of enjambment, capitalization and space to eliminate any sense of pause for her reader. This presents a dilemma in which broken-up sentences form a single image of hurried continuity and obstructs any analytical procedure which might have been made coherent by punctuation, division of stanzas, et cetera:

Hidden the light

Revealed

.....

In the

Blasting of the last atom

Revealed

In the

Unknown (L1-2, 7-11)

Consequently, “Hidden the Light” is very hard to discern on a literal level. The poem, however, has a reoccurring phrase about revelation and the now familiar line “In the” (L3,7,10,15), which according to “You Stand [...]” denotes the secret shaft; the air shaft. Such a reading will of course depend on prior knowledge of Cowen’s poetry, or access to the various poems, as the morphology of the poem itself does not reveal this. The analogy is only made present by the commingling of the various texts, and for all we know, they could have been separate drafts of a longer poetic narrative. But it proposes an interesting discussion which supports and elaborates on the role of the air-shaft-imagery.

In reading “Hidden the Light” we observe a speaker who suggests that the pathway to the “Coming together / Of Allen & Elise” (L4-5) as much as the “Blasting of the last atom” (L8) and “Unknown / Anguish / Of a supernova” (L11-3) are all revealed in the air shaft, or

‘In the.’ This phrase works both on a grammatical level in connecting the lines as it does thematically. We can, however, gather from it being the line that is continuously indented the furthest from the left margin, and is always followed by a line that sits further to its left, that it is not necessarily just a grammatical passing phrase. If one, however, were to treat it as such, Cowen’s cross reference to the snow metaphor would be rendered obsolete, as one would feel inclined to separate the last four lines, leaving the snow “concealed” (L19). In relation to the other poems, it is a pathway, similar to revelatory incantation, that in the poem’s closing lines reveals that “Nothing / Concealed / How the snow falls” (L18-20).

In “From the Brown Brick Back Wall Bathroom” (Cowen, 36) the alliterative opening, the waltz like last three lines, and the juxtaposition of color, are all part of the adjoining chaos of a divided poetic voice: a speaker who feels trapped between two separate realities, paralleling the narrative in “If I Never [...]” and “Third Day [...]”. The literal situation described in the poem is a speaker, who perhaps while thinking out loud, observes her surroundings in detail. The narrative pictures a bathroom covered in brown bricks with a “[...] dirt frosted window” (L2), and suggest a bleak and confined reality that, every once in a while, reveals its opposite in the form of a white rag. The differences between these worlds is of course pertaining to the speaker’s psyche and her views on her own life in relation to the world around. Cowen specifically uses light and dark contrast to create two separate worlds; the world inside the ‘brown brick wall bathroom’, and the world outside the ‘dirt frosted window’, while highlighting both simultaneously.

The first is described with the color brown and as being covered in dirt. At first glance, the last line “when the light is on here” (L5) leaves us with the impression that it is a place normally occupied by darkness, because the light is only on “[...] every once in awhile” (L4). The latter on the other hand is characterized by rain, air and sunlight, befitting the classical elements and its associations to life. While a bathroom would contain what we call waste

water, the rain is fresh and clean. The bathroom window is described as being covered with frost and is a figure of speech, more so than a literal observation. Cowen's use of metonymy is able to vocalize a speaker whose impression is that life inside is frozen still, while life outside keeps moving. The poetic voice is divided in the sense that she is able to connect and differentiate both the inside and outside world. While her body is trapped on the inside, a connection is made for her mind to tread between these two domains. The physical link between these spheres of being is a rag that "[...] blows out / white [...]" (L3-4). Literally, this is most likely a bathroom appliance or accessory, like a towel or cloth, but figuratively it has larger symbolic implications.

The first proof of this is, once again, in Cowen's use of color as contrast. Unlike her description of the bathroom as brown and dirty, the rag is white and clean. The figurative cause and effect of the lost rag, on the poem as a whole, is that light itself becomes a trope that Cowen realizes through metaphor and association. The establishment of light as, first and foremost, pertaining to the world outside the bathroom, as in line three, is if nothing an indication of its figurative meaning when all the contrasting imagery is considered. The darkness that encases the bathroom is juxtaposed by the light outside, and the phrase "in rainy day light [...]" (L3) is metonymically symbolic of the root of all life. However, light as a rhetorical device that transcends both these worlds is not fully established until the final line of the poem. The realization that the white rag is only set free once the world inside the bathroom is flipped on its head is an indication of its importance, and similarity to the air-shaft-imagery. As a contrasting agent alone, the idea of the bathroom being suddenly lit up, is a powerful image that breaks with the entrenched boundaries of the two spheres. An interpretation of this as a 'light-bulb-moment,' metonymically speaking, is also relevant to the establishment of Cowen's final metaphor.

Conceptually, the speaker experiences this event as a form of passive self-actualization. The juxtapositions, which reveal the disconnection between her current state and her potential, are minimized to the extent that the speaker is able to see, even for just a moment, the possibility for achievement. Thus metaphorically, the bathroom light becomes an important reminder of the pursuit of life's full potential. While it is easy to first make the assumption that with each rag lost, the situation grows more dismal. It being the first physical connection, and in a sense the enabler for a deeper analysis, I believe that the white rag is not as much taken away as her seeing her real self from the outside looking in. Thematically, the rag mirrors the air shaft as a pathway to a greater understanding of the self. Despite the initial feeling of hopelessness and sense of disconnection from life, one can see how Cowen sculpts a persona in "From the Brown Brick Back Wall Bathroom," who gains an acute sense of perspective and understanding of her own situation.

In "The Steam Comes Up" (Cowen, 8) Cowen's awareness of the postwar era's social conventions and constructs become painstakingly obvious as her speaker admits a desire to be someone else. She refers to herself as "Oh silly girl" (L9), most likely referring to something she has been called before, and humorously adds "And bricks within your head" (L11). The phrase "With open jeans" (L10) metonymically sets the speaker further apart from the society in which she lives, because it indicates that a level of promiscuity has initially ostracized her on account of her sexuality. It is not necessarily the speaker's own perception of herself, but rather a social construct that has been instilled in society over time, and is a depressing, yet true, characterization of the stereo-typical woman's role from an American postwar perspective.

The Steam itself is a metaphor for the mundane and repetitive cycle of middle class life. Literally it depicts the steam that rises from manhole covers in Cowen's native New York City, and thus signifies a constant variable in life. It does, however, inhabit the properties

pertaining to a double entendre. When the steam rises, and the speaker wonders “On the people in the streets” (L3), she has to close her eyes to imagine their faces, because the steam obstructs her view. In a sense, it reinforces her fantasy as being, a mere fantasy, because she realizes that she more seeks acceptance for who she is than a desire to be different. Thus, the steam is both a metaphor for the prosaic cycle of middle class life, and the speaker’s initial rose-tinted perception of it.

The awareness of this is facilitated further when the speaker, who in the first stanza wishes that “I were / He” (L7-8), points out in the last four lines:

Don’t you think
He doesn’t wish
That he were you
instead? (L12-15)

Cowen’s speaker recognizes the fantasy and devalues the previous sentiments of ‘silliness’ and ‘bricks’ as having any real significance upon her individual value. These last four lines reveal its intended meaning almost like an epiphany to underline the previous metaphor, as the speaker concludes that ‘He’ is as envious of her as she originally was of him. The whole stanza becomes an understated perception of postwar constructs’ rejection of gender equality and individualism, because the speaker realizes that both the mundane life of a housewife, and that of the male provider, is double-sided. Cowen engages a discussion that the perception of right or wrong is merely based on authoritative constructs imposed for social control, not for individual needs and desire.

With “Did I Go Mad in My Mother’s Womb” (Cowen, 101-2), Cowen writes one of her strongest poetic discussions concerning female originality and gender constructs. The poem is an inner dialogue on loneliness and detachment, in which the speaker asserts the reality of her situation, and questions her own condition. The opening line, from which its title is taken,

presents a parallel image of life determined without conditional acceptance: an image of a “[...] mother’s womb” (L1) that reads, equally substantially, metonymically as a person shielded by parental protection, and as a metaphor for being conditioned by gender-roles even before birth.

The speaker deduces her life to the act of “Waiting / To Death” (L7-8). Meanwhile, all she can do is “[...] fidget along the edges of / the perfect point of [...]” a life she can only describe as “the hollow” (L4-5). Cowen once again combines metaphor and metonymy to voice her speaker’s vigorous attempt at grabbing whatever little stimuli life has to offer by a “munched tooth of a second” (L6). Similarly to both “The Steam [...]” and “From the Brown [...],” Cowen engages a dialog of individual potentiality in the face of gender constructs engrained in postwar American middle-class values.

The speaker in “Did I Go Mad [...]” subsequently feels that ‘the floor’ of her life is best described as an idiom; as a floor that “[...] never picks itself / up and walks away” (L9-10). Life is circulatory rather than linear, as “the moving that never moves” (L12), leaving welts, or rather scars, on her brain, the single most unique thing on her body. The ultimate truth, however, “[...] is a rag flapping / sometimes on the window [...]” (L26-7). Like in “From the Brown [...],” Cowen uses the inanimate and the ordinary, typically in motion—flapping, blowing—to figuratively describe her observation of life’s disconnection and unfulfilled self-realization. But while the light in “From the Brown [...]” offers a minuscule ray of hope, “Did I Go Mad [...]” does not. Truth, as in the truth of all women, according to the speaker, is “[...] only the FACT / of WAITING [...]” (L30-1), and is complimented by a question of whether it is “[...] the flash at the end / of a cosmic striptease?” (L31-2). While the cosmic striptease image can possibly be seen as a metaphor for a universal truth that is never fulfilled, but constantly teased, hence the ‘the fact of waiting,’ it possesses a wealth of connotations relating to gender binaries and postwar ideologies.

In *Nudity: A Cultural Anatomy* (2004), Ruth Barcan writes, regarding the striptease, “[...] that many commentators see paradoxical elements at its heart, since it is based on the interplay of offering and denying, of both provoking and satisfying desire” (19). The striptease, during Elise Cowen’s lifetime, was a big part of the growing space age sexploitation film-genre in the United States, and due to its sheer volume of productions, recent critical studies can provide a backdrop for its value to postwar culture and gender ideologies. In *Space Oddities: Women and Outer Space in Popular Film and Culture, 1960-2000* (2010), Marie Lathers notes, on the act of gender identification and its preconceived role, that it is “precisely the process of undressing/dressing that reveals the ‘truth’ of gender [...] [in] the tension between absence and presence of clothing, incarnated in the striptease [...] rather than the moment of complete nakedness” (146). While the female astronaut, a re-occurring image in many of these films, is in itself an empowering image that contradicts with NASA’s refusal to train female astronauts, the sexualization of the space woman retained the structures of society’s gender constructs (Lathers, 5).

In re-writing a comment from Paul Ableman’s *Anatomy of Nakedness* (1984), Ruth Barcan writes “that indeed striptease does remind its (male) spectators that ‘the natural [gender] order is still operational” (88). Adapting Lathers and Barcan’s writing to the cosmic striptease in Cowen’s “Did I Go Mad [...],” one can consider ‘the flash’ as the final revelatory moment that defines her societal role: the truth defining the speaker’s life by the gender binaries of contemporary culture, that which for her is equal to “Waiting / to death” (L7-8).

In the sixth stanza, the first line reads as one single letter, “*I*” (L33), her purest idea of individuality and original thought on the level of language. In juxtaposition to the speaker’s summary of the set boundaries of her life, ‘*I*’ is treated as an abstract noun rather than a pronoun; its referential properties, as in referring to the speaker, is replaced with the quality of

the noun phrase as an idea. To Cowen's speaker, *I* is "unique, a single word" (L35) which is described as:

treasure

.....

perfection

true beauty

of one's own (L36-40)

Its properties of attachment to a single entity is paralleled with the wish for 'freedom' from the constructs in society, as in something that just "wants a little something for itself" (L34). These qualities are also apparent in the short poem, fittingly titled, "I" (Cowen, 49), whose speaker copiously exemplifies the abstract noun's positive features, just like in "Did I Go Mad [...]." She compares its essence to "Morning / The Day" (L2-3), a figurative embrace of its referential properties as fresh and new, or a metaphorical translation of 'I' as life itself. To Cowen's speaker, the idea of the self is able to "Burn away in little stains / And little pains / Without God in the air." (L4-6): thus exemplifying a release from religious and societal obligations, allowing life to run its course, or 'burn away', by the vicissitudes of individual choice.

The overbearing tone of "Did I Go Mad [...]," as a whole, eventually disrupts this idea, because even if such a "true beauty / of one's own" (L39-40) is obtained, it is a truth that only exists to be given away. The speaker's conception of *I* as ultimately unobtainable is elicited from Cowen's use of metaphor in describing men as producers of "[...] blood flowers [...]" (L42). This plant is often referred to as tropical milkweed, a name that stems from its sap, and is a variety of butterflies' primary food source. The layers of Cowen's figurative language, not just in its anticipation of feminist literary theory, but the power of her imagery, has the quality of only growing denser over time. Without the possibility of foreknowledge, the

image of the blood flower's negative precedence over the individual is further heightened by later scientific inquiry. We now know that the plant contains the O.e parasite which infects the butterflies it attracts. It reproduces sexually at the pupa stage and quite effectively parallels the poem's title, message, and theme as a biological example. However, the metaphor is not only sexual in its overtones, juxtaposing reproduction with the speaker's cry for "Love? Is this where, what, why" (L44), as something that is never more than the physical act of intercourse, but draws an unmediated connection to Cowen's poetry in *Death Lives*, where the butterfly is a metaphor for life re-incarnated. The speaker's perception is that the 'blood flower' rather takes than gives, and the constructs of society renders the woman, as a butterfly, incapable of immediate resistance.

In its representation of the postwar female condition, the power of "Did I Go Mad [...]" is that it asserts itself as a product of its constructs. It does not merely convey the feelings of the speaker in relation to the environment but is in itself limited on the level of language, and as an advocate for change. The culmination of language and thematics into a singular body of text is apparent in the enjambed fourth stanza:

That's not really, or only, what
 I mean—among other things I am not
 permitted to feel that much
 Tick tock (L19-22)

These lines present a high level of self-awareness from the speaker, but is construed in such an insecure, pause-like, manner that it can actively overshadow it. The speaker's unhappiness is constantly measured by the seemingly happiness of others and "(The sting of eyes reminds)" (L18). But even if Cowen does not write a way out for her speaker, the last two lines, perhaps dreamingly, justifies the waiting game in that "[...] there's something in it ... / to be continued" (L46-47).

Cowen's conceivably darkest poetic discussion on female originality and detachment we come to find in "I Took the Skins of Corpses" (Cowen, 33-5), in which the speaker attempts to forge her own identity from the remains of the dead. Cowen's use of end-rhyme and iambic metre is reminiscent to what one would find in children's verse, but as Trigilio points out, "[...] in subject matter, the poem is anything but a children's narrative" (2002, 133). "I Took [...]" engages a revisionary rhetoric on the establishment of a second-self to counteract the patriarchal structures that constantly undermine female potential. While the speaker collects body parts to mask her own reflection as "[...] bald and blind and quilled" (L36), the poem's macabre narrative "[...] is a seething allegory for a woman's search for inspiration in a poetic tradition dominated by men" (134).

In "I Took [...]" the second-self is first and foremost defined on a literal level: it is not allegorically implied or obscured by figurative language. The speaker believes that in order to complete herself, she must literally pick apart the components of others, and in doing so, she will find herself equally "[...] precious marble pure" (L40) as the parts she takes. Figuratively, Cowen is naturally alluding to a much larger network of connotations relating to originality, influence, and gender constructs. Even though "I Took [...]" inhabits the essence of *The Re-Write* in its revisionary approach to the creation of a second-self, the speaker is ultimately unable to fulfil her transformation. Nearly every stanza inhabits a striking duality in which the speaker's expectations are continuously discounted and counterpoised by the harsh reality of its impossibility:

I cut the hair of corpses
 And wove myself a sheath
 Finer than silk or wool I thought
 And shivered underneath (L5-8)

Throughout the poem, the speaker is constantly weaving together jeans, sheaths and hoods, but her expectations are never affirmed. From the skins of corpses, she makes jeans by dying the skin blue, and proclaims, “I can wear these everywhere” (L3), but nevertheless is “[...] sat home” (L4) wearing them in confinement. In cutting “[...] the ears of corpses” (L9) she hopes to be remembered for the words she writes, but realizes that adopting the speech of her influences is fruitless, and “I paid for that in blood” (L12). Equally “[...] the act of reading produces only falsehood and negated identity” (Trigilio, 2002, 136) as the speaker “[...] borrowed heads of corpses / To do my reading by / I found my name on every page / And every word a lie” (L24-8). Cowen uses “[...] overdetermined puns on stitching and weaving as writing” which coincides with the semantic development of the word ‘writing’, “given that the Latin for text, *tesserae*, derives from the verb that means to weave” (Trigilio, 137). So in stitching together body parts, Cowen’s speaker is effectively trying to transgress her role as a woman poet, by creating a second-self born out of male authority.

Cowen’s image of jeans reflects a somewhat masculine ethos through association and metonymy, and in *Fashion, Culture, and Identity* (1992), Fred Davis explains:

[...] considering its origins and longtime association with workingmen, hard physical labor, the outdoors, and the American West, much of the blue jeans’ fundamental mystique seems to emanate from populist sentiments of democracy, independence, equality, freedom, and fraternity. (70)

In Cowen’s own time, these “first non—‘working stiffs’ to become attached to blue jeans” were groups who spoke in “[...] opposition to the dominant conservative, middle-class, consumer-oriented culture of American society” (70), and readily explain the speaker’s attraction to them as an extension of Cowen’s affiliation with the Beats.

The speaker’s attempt to assert her new identity within this masculine domain proves itself to be impossible, paralleling Cowen’s own invisible role in Beat literary history. She can

only rebel by association, and the modal verb ‘can’ indicates that the speaker does not wear jeans everywhere—unlike her male peers who “offered a visible means for announcing such antiestablishment sentiments” (70)—but remains passive as “I sat home in my jeans” (L4), an apt metaphor for gender-restricted views on rebellion, and the woman’s role in postwar America. Furthermore, the speaker’s struggle to fit into male-coded jeans, as part of a revisionary project, is further enhanced by the metonymical relationship between jeans and the color blue.

According to Martina Plümacher and Peter Holz, in *Speaking of Colors and Odors* (2007), “[...] the core meaning of *blue* [according to linguist Susanne Niemeier] refers to the natural blue of the sky or the blue sea” but “[meaning] extensions can develop in different directions” because “[metonymies] are highly culture-dependent” (12). One particular meaning-extension ingrained in western culture is blue as a signifier of gender, and in particular, the idea of baby-blue. Niemeier explains that while baby-blue itself is a generalization, a type of metonymy in which “we refer to more than the exact referent [...] when using the lexical item in question, but stay within the same domain” (145)—we know its shade to be lighter than the blue of the ocean or sky— it also carries a range of connotations pertaining to gender distinction. Consequently, the relationship between blue as a signifier of a baby-boy, jeans as blue jeans, and jeans as a symbol of male-coded rebellion, presents a bond of masculine metonymy that is so strong the speaker in “I Took [...]” is unable to place herself within it.

Cowen further underlines the point of preconceived gender-roles in the sixth stanza, when the speaker takes the ‘thoughts’ of corpses to go shopping. Trigilio remarks that “[...] her blue skin privatizes her rather than carries her into the world” (2002, 134), and similarly, the products she buys have been designated to her by a consumer society and the ‘thoughts’ of others:

I took the thoughts of corpses
 To buy my daily needs
 But all the goods in all the stores
 Were neatly labeled Me (L21-4)

The speaker is unable to fulfil her transformation as she realizes that her gender's fixed societal role is as much thought-out by the corpses, whose features she amalgamates, as the social constructs she tries to escape. The speaker recognizes the inefficiency in emulating her peers, and the male-dominant literary history behind them, because in doing so—on account of her gender—she would effectively write herself off.

Trigilio notes that through "I Took [...]," Cowen recalls "Mary Shelley's role, and her mother Mary Wollstonecraft's, in the shaping of feminist literary history" (2002, 137), as a woman writing in a male-oriented literary and poetic movement. But the speaker, as an extension of Cowen herself, is in "I Took [...]," unlike Shelley, unable to carve out her own original and authorial space. The absence of a gender-fluid lineage of influence presents a dilemma to the speaker and embodies the reason for her Frankenstein-esque project's ultimate collapse. Her second-self becomes a product of "[...] subjectivities rather than one consolidated subject" (137), and the amalgam of her influences are part of the very forces that inhibit her from forming original speech.

The similarities between "I Took [...]" and Shelley's *Frankenstein* narrative is, of course, why Trigilio makes this comparison in the first place. Cowen's speaker not only strives to mimic Shelley on an authorial level, as a woman who managed to form original speech amidst male precursors and peers, but synthesises the *Frankenstein* narrative on the level of thematics. If one views *Frankenstein* as a "cautionary fable of masculinized fertility," then Cowen has "re-appropriated Victor Frankenstein's appropriation of fertility and re-gendered his 'child' as female" (Trigilio, 2014, xxi). But while Victor Frankenstein loses

control over his creation, Cowen's speaker is a combination of both his monster and Frankenstein himself, and as she swaps her body parts for the parts of corpses, it is rather original creativity and individuality that is gradually lost.

The speaker "[...] thought the corpses vital" (L37) but risks her own identity in creating "an identity for herself located in a body that performs many identities" (Trigilio, 2002, 137), which proves to be anything but original. Upon taking a corpse's heart she finds it "[...] bloodied as a mind" (L43) and becomes a ghoul herself, because this heart is no different from the thoughts, or 'minds', of the corpses which already labeled her inferior. The speaker's constant miscalculations come to a close in this stanza and is perhaps most apparent in her replacement of the corpse's heart "[...] with small jewels" (L42). She is willing to reciprocate her theft, and metaphorically return the creative energy she takes (perhaps something Cowen herself saw in Shelley), but Cowen's use of homonym in mind/mine underlines that the thoughts which marginalized her from the outset has now become her own.

The poem ends with the speaker, now dead, wishing to sell her own body "To the student doctor's knife" (L52): "[...] a gesture of control over her creation that Dr. Frankenstein could not perform in his final moments" (Trigilio, 2002, 137). The speaker, however, distinguishes between her current state and that of a spirit, because in order to return her body she must escape "the spirits / In whose trappings I am jailed" (L45-6). She suggests that even after death she is equally overshadowed by the spirits of the corpses she robbed: "They buy me wine or read a book / No one can make my bail" (L47-8). The latter part of the poem in general would suggest that "the simple commutative version of Cowen's identity proffered by Beat commentators might be accurate" (136), but this last stanza, in particular, insinuates that the speaker is a part of a larger project at work. Giving her body back to medical dissection, just as she took parts of corpses, and metaphorically dissected her influences, suggest a sacrificial undertone to Cowen's rhetoric. Such a reading would suggest

that the speaker's ultimate failure in forming original speech was a necessary step to inspire future female creativity.

Cowen traces gender constructs' role in female detachment from influence, originality, and life outside domesticity. Separate environments, or reality-spheres, are aligned in juxtaposition to promote a poetic discourse that is notably observational. The repercussions of observing these narrative collisions are inflictions of hopelessness that materialize in the speaker's psyche. The air-shaft-imagery offers hope while simultaneously affirming the abjectness of her solitary existence: Cowen's rhetoric illustrates that transgressing female subjugation, and abiding by the constructs that implement them, actualize a similar kind of loneliness. Gender itself equally subjugates the speaker's neighbor in "Third Day [...]" to a domestic environment, as it hinders the speaker in "I Took [...]" to form original speech. Cowen uses both the air shaft and a rag to create a pathway-narrative to transgress obfuscation, and as a by-product, acknowledges a disconnection between the speaker's life and potential. The level of self-actualization is nevertheless passive, viz. no plan-of-action is materialized. But as made explicitly clear in "Did I Go Mad [...]," and further extended to the more revisionary rhetoric in "I Took [...]," Cowen's speaker is often resolute in her attempt to demonstrate how these constructs affect her life.

4. The Re-Write

Going beyond its deficiency in asserting itself in "I Took [...]," the extension of the second-self predicates the essence of *The Re-Write*. Trigilio explains that instead of "[collapsing] differences into one originary authority, one which would be localized in the expressionist heritage of British and American romanticism—and, too often, of misogynistic self-reliance—central to the work [...] of authoritative Beat founders [...]" (2002, 123), Cowen exercises a poetic strategy of "[...] authority-within-transgression" (124): an extension

of a common Beat ethos of re-inscribing and transgressing authority, fixed gender distinctions, and cultural constructs. Similarly to her male contemporaries, Cowen “[...] spoke loudly and visibly against postwar conformity,” and wrote to counteract an era which “sought to exact silence from those who deviated from [its] social and sexual norms” (124). Trigilio explains that if her male peers could transgress authoritative constructs as part of a revisionary project, “their models nevertheless were in the spirit of romantics such as Blake and Whitman [...]” (136), in that literary history was predominantly male-coded. But as a female author, Cowen’s “gender representations, of course, carry with them an extra burden of authority to overcome” (136). As a result, the strategy of conveying authority-within-transgression is a product of her authorship’s near equal affiliation and detachment from Beat authority.

As a woman, Cowen herself was subjected to her era’s socio-political constructs and religious authority to a much larger degree than her male counterparts. The act of rebellion had more or less been defined as a male tradition and is equivalently epitomized by the male dominance within Beat literary history. This male authority is also present within the works themselves, and in Trigilio’s editorial notes, Freeman Champney’s review of Kerouac’s *On the Road*, *The Subterraneans*, and *The Dharma Bums* in the *Antioch Review* [Spring 1959] states that women’s “[...] only real function are as audience and as erotic furniture (sometimes as providers of meal tickets)” (2014, 152). As a strategy to rectify this imbalance, “Cowen needed to create a second voice for herself within Beat outsider circles, since her gender destabilized her authority from the outset” (Trigilio, 2002, 124), both in postwar American society and in the Beat community of writers.

Unlike “I Took [...],” in which the second-self is a literal amalgamation of other individuals, and a metaphor for a female writer’s search for inspiration, *The Re-Write*’s second-self is comparatively less literal. It is rather a change-of-tone in Cowen’s rhetoric: an

authoritative voice that is not present in prior chapters. In “I Took [...]” the project seemed ill-fated from the start. Re-writing the speaker’s gender to accommodate male-influence suggested that the speaker herself would only facilitate the constructs her influences upheld. If her peers and precursors were enablers, the main shift in how we define the second-self in *The Re-Write*, is that Cowen goes to the root of the problem, by-passing her previous project altogether. Instead of figuratively adopting the speech of male writers by removing parts of corpses, Cowen’s speaker adopts the speech of the cultural institutions that promoted gender inequality from the very beginning. The difficulties of influence, creativity, and originality, are mere products of masculine and religious authority that can be transgressed by re-writing them completely.

Consequently, this chapter is even more reliant on the introductory discussion on the significance of authorship in attention to biography and textuality. The appreciation of Cowen’s rhetoric is only fully realized in our understanding of culture, biography, and text’s trilateral relationship, and how one affects the other. Cowen’s anticipation of feminist literary studies is made clear in Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar’s *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination* (1980) which outlines anxiety-of-authorship as a female-oriented revision of Harold Bloom’s *The Anxiety of Influence* (1973), in relation to how writers are compared and removed from their predecessors and peers:

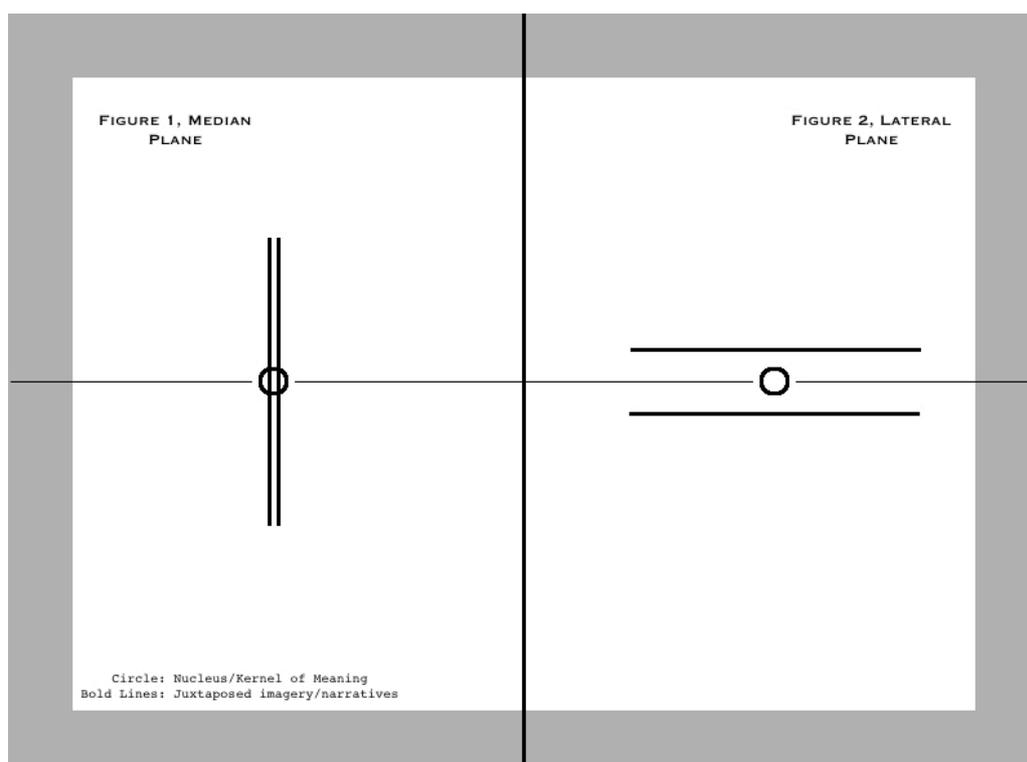
the female poet does not experience the “anxiety of influence” in the same way that her male counterpart would, for the simple reason that she must confront precursors who are almost exclusively male, and therefore significantly different from her [...] therefore, the woman writer's male precursors symbolize authority; on the other hand, despite their authority, they fail to define the ways in which she experiences her own identity as a writer. (48)

Trigilio's idea of authority-within-transgression, in the creation of a second-self, is thus a poetic strategy we observe in *The Re-Write* as a direct consequence of the problems outlined by Gilbert and Gubar. In re-writing both fleshly and metaphysical desire in poems such as "Dear God of the Bent Trees of Fifth Avenue" and "I Wanted a Cunt of Golden Pleasure," as ways to transgress religious discourse's established constructs, Cowen must not only re-write religious authority over her gender, but contravene the anxiety-of-authorship by imposing an authorial second-self. According to Richard Peabody, Allen Ginsberg had suggested that "the strong woman who could hold her own" (qtd. in R.C. Johnson, 12) would be nurtured within the group. But in discussing "a 'DREAM LETTER' from John Clellon Holmes re-corded (sic) by Allen Ginsberg in 1954," Joyce Johnson recalls, in *Minor Characters*, that Ginsberg suggested "The social organization which is most true of itself to the artist is the boy gang" (79). The self-asserting quality of Cowen's rhetoric in *The Re-Write* is perhaps an attempt at ingress, but as "a marginalized group within an always already marginalized bohemia, women Beat writers are a literary cohort colonized by the Beat generation's iconic public image" (R.C. Johnson, 12): an image that merely reflected the 'boy gang' in Ginsberg's own letter.

In reconstructing the authority narrative Cowen often displaces authoritative discourse through juxtaposed imagery. But where the poems in *The Air Shaft* failed to suggest any form of reconciliation, the speaker's new-found authorial language provides the leeway needed to completely re-write them. This insertion of new meaning into pre-defined texts, revealing what Kristeva called its translinguistic doubleness, is where the issues of intertextuality most clearly arise. But to effectively describe this without having to commit to the disappearance of the author, which in itself completely disregards the anxiety-of-authorship, and the need for a balanced textual/biographical reading, I would like to elaborate on a paradigm, or an explanatory image, which we can use to visualize how these poems significantly differ from those in *Death Lives* and *The Air Shaft* (see Figure 1/2).

Cowen generally presents a speaker whose body or soul functions as an intermediary between two separate discourses. As products of their own history and culturally shared conventions, these discourses present thematically contrary narratives. In exploiting their juxtaposition, we can picture the meaning derived from a poem as its nucleus, represented by an object on a horizontal line. If we look at the poetry in the previous chapters, ex. “Did I Go Mad [...]” or even “A Cockroach,” we can picture the juxtaposed imagery on the median plane of this line, like a tug of war between opposites. The outcome will either be that one remains as the favorable view, or there will be no clear-cut resolution. They are moreover narrative collisions than one reconciled narrative. The *Re-Write* is the shift when these juxtapositions are viewed from two vantage points simultaneously. Instead of splitting the nucleus at its core and emphasizing its contradictory nature, we can picture the same juxtapositions on a lateral plane, in parallel to the nucleus. Instead of presenting two alternatives they become part of a negotiation to write a new kernel of meaning: a nucleus that is rather a product of the juxtapositions themselves than one at the expense of the other.

Fig. 1/2. Explanatory Image. Engesæth, Bjørn, May 2018



In “Dear God of the Bent Trees of Fifth Avenue” (Cowen, 6), these juxtapositions are used to re-write Christianity’s monotheistic authority over the material body. The poem reads like a letter, and its narrative depicts a speaker who addresses God directly. However, in “Dear God [...]” he is mere shadow of his biblical persona’s divine providence and power. Opposite themes such as sanctity and sexuality are merged and consolidated in human desire through figurative language and poetic mediation. As two domains of human existence they come to equilibrate rather than subordinate its role to one another, and the negotiation is constantly re-affirmed by parallel word choice and juxtaposed imagery. Instead of prescribing to a-typical redemptive language in dealing with religious authority, the poem opens with a call for mergence of the physical body and God by pouring the speaker’s “[...] willful dust up your [God’s] veins” (L2). Cowen’s metaphor for heroin is a key moment in the negotiation and is the commencement of what Trigilio calls “[...] a symbiotic relationship with a Creator-God” (2002, 125).

Cowen’s consolidation of narratives presents an image, or a kernel of meaning; nucleus, that is drastically different from the perceived meaning of each narrative on its own. The interdependent relationship between the speaker and God presents a new-found imagery which meaning is a product of the juxtaposed imagery’s shift from a median to a lateral position of the poem’s nucleus: two originally separate narratives, one fueled by sex and heroin, the other by sanctitude and religion, which are placed in parallel to initiate a poetic comingling of antithetic texts. In this new kernel of meaning, God himself is no longer sovereign: he is an addict whose addiction is readily supplied by the speaker. Hence, Cowen’s juxtapositions are not used to outline the narratives’ differences. Each narrative recognizes the other’s existence, and we can say that the speaker’s filtered interaction with God, and the

method used to re-write religious authority in “Dear God [...]” is a form of parallelism. But before further analysis we need to define its method more clearly.

Russian-American linguist Roman Jakobson’s “Grammatical Parallelism and Its Russian Facet” (1966) described parallelism as “not merely a stylistic device of formularistic syntactical duplication; it is intended to achieve a result reminiscent of binocular vision” (qtd. in Tsumura, 167). Historically speaking, parallelism’s strongest connection to poetry lies within the poetic Hebrew tradition. In “Vertical Grammar of Parallelism in Hebrew Poetry” (2009), David T. Tsumura explains how “two lines often constitute a compound sentence, with the syntactical images of two lines being perfectly superimposed” (170). James L. Kugel of the Institute for the History of the Jewish Bible in Israel offers a more nuanced picture in saying that the binary construction may not be that either clause is “mere repetition [...] but emphatic or even retrospective and prospective as an intensifying clause” (qtd. in Hunt, 185): “His left hand under my head, his right hand embracing me” (*Song of Songs*, 2:6)

In this example from the Tanakh [Hebrew Bible], the parallel syntagm is not syntactically equal but synonymous and lexically mirrored; the “supportive [...] יָמֵינוּ [left (hand or side)] [is] paralleled by his [...] יְמֵינָו [right (hand or side)]” (Hunt, 195). Furthermore, the word-images of the left hand under her head, and the right hand embracing, parallel the passive/active relationship in the Hebrew tradition, thus forming an elevated image as the clauses are paired in twofold (195). Phrases such as “apple glutton heaven” in “Dear God [...]” are easily adaptable to these readings of binary language, though the spheres of authority in Cowen’s work might lend themselves more usefully to a discussion of antithetic parallelism in which “two contrastive elements are dealt with [as] an example of superimposition of the opposite sides of the same coin, not of two contradictory thoughts” (Tsumura, 170). This is a plausible analysis that coincides with Trigilio’s reading of

metaphysical desire and fleshly desire as equally transcendental experiences in Elise Cowen's "Dear God [...]" (2002, 126-7).

Trigilio himself has used the term syntactic parallelism, which is fine, though redundant use may put an unnecessary amount of stress on syntax. I believe we can apply the concept of antithetic parallelism, the pairing of two extremes to bring forth an idea or statement, to Cowen's poetry, because a parallel element, even as Trigilio writes, is not just the repetition of certain parallel phrases but the coupling of spheres of influence and concepts that move beyond mere syntax. The nature of antithetic parallelism itself is revisionary in its use of repetition through contrast, negation, and reconciliation, and as result becomes a method for reinforcement of knowledge. If we consider antithetic parallelism as a strategy in her work, we begin to see how language as a mediator slowly removes the authoritative traces of religious discourse, which allows Cowen's rhetoric to take on its own quasi-religious authority.

In the traditional religious domain desire is a controlled entity, in "Dear God [...]" desire is a free and unburdened "manifestation of the sacred" (Trigilio, 2002, 125). It is uncircumcised, and thus freed from the religious narrative and colonization of the body. The "uncircumcized sin of my heart" (L9) as a metaphorical trope for liberated desire is founded upon the antithetical coupling of orthodox ritualism and moral violation; circumcision and sin. Trigilio also points out that this polarizing tension is "enacted [...]" at the level of language" (127), in which 'sin' takes on homonymous properties as a play on skin that evades religious circumcision. Cowen's use of antithetic parallelism conclusively frees desire from its institutional connotations without conceding to either side of the negotiation.

The 'metaphysical desire' relating to God, and the 'fleshly desire' relating to human sexuality become equally spiritual because their re-imagining through parallelism renders both one material desire. The speaker and the "[...] God of the bent trees on Fifth Avenue"

(L1) are transformed into an interdependent unit in “[...] belly-flat worlds” (L3) as the speaker is poured like heroin up his veins in line two. Cowen metaphorical depiction of the world as belly-flat with bent trees highlights its imperfections, and along with the antithetical image of an “[...] apple-glutted heaven” (L7), the speaker is able to add “[...] golden pleasure” (L7) by intercourse with God’s “[...] only begotten cobalt dream [Christ]” (L6). Trigilio describes it as a filtered experience with God; two antithetic experiences by tradition, now reconciled through poetic negotiation; a “heretical insistence that direct experience with the sacred can emerge from sexual intercourse with the sacred [...] without surrendering the tension between these two poles of authority” (Trigilio, 2002, 126-7).

The Re-Write as a poetic strategy is further developed in “I Wanted a Cunt of Golden Pleasure” (Cowen, 89), where the speaker addresses a wish to honor a lover as a religious ritual in a “materialist community of flesh” (Trigilio, 2002, 133), in a “whole city of body” (L21). By mimicking the authoritative voice of religious worship, “re-writing narratives of Spirit and flesh” (131), divinity, as in *Death Lives*, comes to be re-inscribed outside the realm of Judeo-Christian beliefs, and is equally as material as it is spiritual. Nevertheless, it is first and foremost Cowen’s reliance on the performative nature of Judeo-Christian language itself that elevates the poem to a negotiation of “religious verity to variance that depends on the commingling of Western and Eastern practices of the sacred” (133).

It seems a fitting rhetoric for Cowen to utilize because, as we have already established, parallelism in the poetic tradition is congenitally religious. In *The Art of Biblical Poetry* (1985), American scholar Robert Alter remarks that at the heart of this tradition, the language of parallelism is an “elevated kind of discourse, perhaps ultimately rooted in a magical conception of language as a potent performance” (qtd. in Trigilio, 126). If we consider the speaker in “I Wanted [...],” the desire “To honor [...],” “To Serve [...],” “Ease [...]” and “To Glory [...]” (L3-19) God, comes equally across as a performative action as it does as words

on a page. As in breaking up with a lover, or the pronouncement of husband and wife, the action and utterance happens simultaneously. While one could argue that this language is referential, in that it is merely collectively reminiscent of acentric Biblical or Judeo-Christian writing, its resemblance to prayer deems it explicitly performative through the speaker's implorations.

As a result, the divine lover in "I Wanted [...]" is not 'honored' or 'gloried' as a God, authoritative in its omnipresence, and as a divine truth to be carried out by the poem's speaker. Cowen's use of performative language honors this person in the physical body of the speaker:

Oh that I was a
cunt of golden pleasure more pure
than heroin or heaven

To honor you in (L7-10)

Like in "Dear God [...]" the body equals sexual expression and desire, and is compared with heroin as something which can be given and consumed. The alliterative connectedness of 'heroin,' 'heaven', and 'honor' also implies that heroin parallels divinity as an equally powerful experience. While the speaker in "Dear God [...]" adds 'golden pleasure' to paradise by re-writing spiritual and sexual experience as an equally transcendental experience, 'golden pleasure' in "I Wanted [...]" is moreover a metaphor for the body's attainment of spiritual properties. In one way, we are talking about the same thing, but "I Wanted [...]" as Trigilio writes, "reads like a continuity of 'Dear God [...]" (2002, 127) on a metaphysical level. The act of intercourse is replaced with the idea of the body, and religion is fleshed out in its institutional grip over the soul. The symbiotic relationship between God and the speaker in "Dear God [...]" becomes the equivalent of the co-dependent relationship between body

and soul in “I Wanted [...]” Their parallel relationship, however, reveals itself to be equally polarizing in the world of western metaphysics as in religious discourse.

If one considers Substance Dualism, the body and mind are independent units which can exist without the other. They can, however, influence and interfere. This concept, which mainly evolved from “Sixth Meditation” in René Descartes’ 1647 treatise *Meditations on First Philosophy*, can be summed up in that “the whole mind appears to be united with the whole body, if the foot is cut off, or the arm, or another part of the body, I know [cognosco] that nothing is therefore subtracted from the mind” (86). The influence of Buddhism that was so prevalent in *Death Lives* shows itself to be equally important to Cowen’s poetic negotiation in “I Wanted [...]” when she states, “Soul like your face before you were born” (L17-8). This reference to a Zen Koan, as Trigilio notes, “challenges any possibility of grasping originary knowledge” (2002, 132), because such a statement is extraordinarily transcendental.

Consequently, the soul is equally as drained of its metaphysical properties as the body is “lifted to the level of the soul” (132). The body is no longer one single vessel but a “[...] whole city of body” (L21), metonymically symbolic of its deity, and its presence is constantly reaffirmed at the expense of the soul. It has “breast, hair, fingers” (20), and as previously discussed, can both glory and honor the spiritual in a fleshly desire, much like in “Dear God [...]” The soul is hence “emptied of originary precedence and re-imagined as a materialist body” (133): one that is equal in both spirit and flesh.

As an individual entity of meaning, the mind, or the soul, is as Descartes would say, “altogether distinct from the body” (86), and I believe that Cowen, the individual, very much recognized this as a part of her own religion and upbringing, and consequently very much a part of herself. The re-imagining of the soul and body into a new kernel of meaning, released from the shackles of “Western notions of divinity” (Trigilio, 2002, 131), is very much the

culmination of Cowen's own struggles in bridging the gap between her own sexuality, Jewish roots, and her ventures into eastern religions.

In "Your Arms Around Me All Night" (Cowen, 63), the act of spiritual transformation through intercourse is depicted with a heightened level of intimacy and fear. Literally, the poem describes a speaker who wakes up in the arms of a lover and is frightened by the potential consequences. The speaker twice describes the sensation of being held as feeling "Cramped / Frightened" (L2-4,6-7), but the level of fear is not based on preconceived insecurities towards one's own body and being. Rather, when the speaker remarks "I woke to find me there," the emphasis on 'I' and 'woke,' in relation to the rest of the poem, mirrors that of an awakening. The fear felt by the speaker is thereupon more readily seen as product of a spiritual transformation. She is not only "Frightened / By the tenderness holding me" (L7-8) as the event itself, but by "Not knowing what you held" (L5) due to the divine change that occurs within her during the mergence of body and soul.

The power of Cowen's inscription of soul into body, and vice versa, is in "Your Arms [...]," as opposed to "I Wanted [...]," realized as a consensus due to its extension to her lover:

And once my eyes opened on

Creation

Tearing through your face

In the act of come.

I didn't know you looked like that" (L9-13).

Cowen's use of metonymy in 'creation' in 'the act of come' parallels reproduction as divinity experienced through sexual release. In this case the literal image is sidelined by a transcendental experience that unfolds in figurative language. Creation assimilates the connotations of re-birth for both the speaker and her lover, and in the last two lines it is clear

that the soul, as place of celestial power, can only be achieved through her lover's body:

“Everything I Love, I need to be / Hides in you.” (L16-17).

The imprint of divinity into body as into the soul is further discussed in the poem “Teacher - Your Body My Kabbalah” (Cowen, 27-9), which by its title alone, imbeds esoteric Hebrew imagery within the realm of mortal existence. Once again, Cowen exercises religious speech, but this time by introducing the sixth *sefirah* of the Tree of Life, from Kabbalah, in the poem's opening lines “Rhamim—Compassion / Tiferete —Beauty” (1-2). The sixth *sefirah* is the integration of judgement and compassion, which through perfect harmonization, manifests itself as divinity. According to Trigilio, “the *sefiorth* unfolds in the material body of her speaker's teacher” (2002, 127), but the unmitigated expanse of references indicates that this ‘teacher’ is not necessarily a singular entity or person. The materialization of God as an embodied experience, for instance, takes the shape of both “Donald's first bed [...]” (L39), as in Cowen's Bernard philosophy professor and lover, Donald Cook, and “Keith's jumping old man in the waves” (L29), as in Keith Gibbs, her boyfriend in the late fifties. Rather than describing a single experience as divine, the speaker in “Teacher [...]” strives to re-write divinity in ambisexual terms as a product of intercourse and sexual fantasy that manifests itself both physically and spiritually.

Cowen's new language of consensus is first drafted out as a fantasy in the second stanza. Like in “I Took [...]”, Cowen channels Mary Shelley's impact on feminist literary history by describing her “Delicate thought” (L7) of shared dominance as “Frankenstein of delicate grace” (L9), empowering intercourse as an ambisexual experience that is equally giving and receiving across gender. This thought, however, is “posed by my fear” (L10) that her fantasy of dominance will not be returned to culminate in a balanced *sefirah* if her lover doesn't “Graciously / Take me / by the throat” (L12-14) in the same fantasy in which she is “trying to choke you” (L4). The speaker argues that her lover “couldn't hurt me except in wit

/ in funny” (L18) and gradually builds towards the fourth stanza in which sexual experience, through compassion and judgement, is finally enacted as an equally dominant force as it is submissive:

I leap to choke you
and you

.....

Take me by the throat (L25-28)

The analogy of her lover’s scent as that of “The aroma of Mr. Rochester’s cigars” (L3) reinforces the use of feminist literary tradition, not only by referencing the relationship between Jane Eyre and Edward Rochester, but also by the cultural and literary impact of Charlotte Brontë’s writing. Jane’s strong sense of self, her reluctance to enter marriage without proper economic means, and the change in character dynamics as Rochester loses his sight and Jane gains her fortune, parallels Cowen’s speaker’s thirst for spirituality through an equal merger of flesh and soul. One could suggest that in “Teacher [...]” Cowen re-writes the gender structures within her own society through a template for altering power-structures, and the possibility for achievement, set by Jane Eyre in the Victorian period.

The ambisexual rhetoric of the poem is constantly embellished with Cowen’s lyrical bombardment of both personal and cultural references. According to Trigilio (2014, 135-36), in writing “Teacher [...]” Cowen drew a lot of inspiration from the French film *Les Enfants du Paradis* (1945), which becomes explicitly apparent when she writes “Your / Frankenstein / Deberoux Baptiste” (L22-4), referencing Baptiste Deburau, “the androgynous male lead character modeled after nineteenth-century mime Jean-Gaspard Deburau” (135). Cowen’s use of enjambment is seriously effective in juxtaposing imagery and its intended meaning. It obscures the line between subject and object to such an extent that it mirrors the gender-fluid narrative on the level of language:

Your
 Frankenstein
 Deberoux Baptiste
 I leap to choke you
 and you
 Graciously

Take me by the throat (L22-8)

According to Trigilio, “the provisional truth of the sexed self” is also “unabashedly visible” (2002, 130-1) in “Someone I Could Kiss” (Cowen, 59), where, similarly to “Teacher [...],” the ambisexual nature of the speaker’s voice is emphasized by “forcefully enjambed lines” (Trigilio, 131). The conditionality of the poem, of a speaker who *could* kiss him or her, echoes the first part of “Teacher [...]” where the premise of the negotiation is outlined. The latter, however, due to its inclusion in *The Re-Write*, takes a up a much more active engagement in rendering the fantasy a reality. Accordingly, it becomes difficult to differentiate between ‘Debreoux Baptiste’ as a reference to herself, or if she is in fact addressing her lover as “Deberoux Baptiste / I leap to choke you” (L24-25). In the same manner one could ask if she is her lover’s Dr. Frankenstein, or Frankenstein’s monster, paralleling the tension of balance of the *sefirah*.

The act of judgement, in this *sefirah*, is also acted out as a form of regret from misjudgment, highlighting the speaker’s path to divinity as one of trial and error, not of the conventional epiphany. The *sefirah* of judgement—of Gevurah-Strength—is in Aryeh Kaplan’s translation of *The Bahir* (1979) of a soul that “restrains, and only gives that which is earned with strict justice” (113). When the character of Keith proclaims, “I want you to pick me up when I fall down” (L31), Cowen’s speaker responds that “I wouldn’t & [consequently] fell” (L32). In Donald’s bed she ends up fantasizing about someone else and asserts “shame

changing him to you” (L40). Cowen is most likely referring to Ginsberg, who in this fantasy is “talking of / [...] green automobiles” (L41,43), a reference to his own poem “The Green Automobile.” As a result, the speaker arrives to the probable conclusion that neither relationship could measure up to her expectations, due to their imbalance of compassion and judgement. The poem asserts that God has to be sought through the meeting of bodies, though divinity is no guarantee.

In “Rose Man” (Cowen, 46-7), the complexity of Cowen’s Kabbalah infused imagery grows even denser than in “Teacher [...], and its narrative can be difficult to discern on account of the apparent lack of literal language. In short, the poem is a description of a speaker’s spiritual awakening through sexual intercourse. Cowen’s poetic negotiation embeds itself within the metaphysical language of Jewish esotericism, and the poem’s speaker, to all appearances, expresses euphoria through a celestial epiphany spawned out of sexual hunger and touch:

Rose Man

In

My hunger

I touch the fullness of

Ein sof (L5-9)

Ein Sof is described in the *Kabbalah* as the divine energy of a creator-God before his self-manifestation. It is to be understood as limitless and unending, and according to Arthur Green’s introduction to Daniel C. Matt’s translation of *The Zohar, Volume One* (2004), “*Ein Sof* refers to the endless and undefinable reservoir of divinity, the ultimate source out of which everything flows” (xlvi). While *Ein Sof* is “utterly transcendent in the sense that no words can describe it, no mind comprehend it” (xlvi), Cowen’s speaker is able to both understand and touch it:

Fingers on your

belly

and glimpsed

First lights of splendor” (L10-3).

Similar to most poems in *The Re-Write*, the speaker proposes that the intermingling of flesh and sexual energy works as an intermediate between metaphysical spirituality and the physical world. What might be less obvious is that this is revealed in the title alone, because in *The Zohar*, the imagery of the rose relates to the assembly of Israel, which is formed by the same forces that are integrated in *Tiferete*:

Just as a rose among throne is colored red and white, so Assembly of Israel includes judgement and compassion [...] like the rose, sitting five sturdy leaves, paradigm of five fingers. This rose is the cup of blessing. (Matt, 1-2).

Symbolically, Rose Man is a lover whose energy, in conjunction with the speaker's, parallels *Tiferete* as the flow of energy between compassion [Chesed] and judgement [Gevurah] in the Tree of Life. The poetic integration of the sixth *sefirah* is, like in “Teacher [...],” embedded religious discourse that has been completely re-routed to cherish rather than hide sexual expression: re-imagining western religious constructs' grip over bodily desire. The imagery of the rose, however, lends itself to a more elaborate level of symbolism than *Tiferete* alone, due its near all-encompassing rhetoric (if we are to use Daniel C. Matt's commentary in *The Zohar*): “The leaves of rose plants grow in clusters of five [...] In Genesis there are five words, alluding to five divine leaves; the five sefirot emanating from *Binah* and transmitting the flow to [*Malchut*]” (2). *Malchut* is the last of the ten *sefirot* in the Tree of Life and arise from man rather than God himself.

In *Dictionary of Jewish Lore and Legend* (1991), Alan Unterman explains that “[in] the imagery of the Kabbalah, [*Malchut*] is the most overtly female *sefirah* [...] referred to imaginatively as ‘the daughter of God’” and “[she] is like the moon reflecting the divine light

into the world” (181). Because *Malchut* is seen as *the Divine Female Presence*, mirroring the female speaker, Rose Man could be linked to *Zen Unpin*, which consist of the six *sefirot* above her. In *The Bahir*, it is written that “Zen Unpin is what is usually referred to as the ‘Supernal Man’ [...],” who is the masculine presence that “binds himself to the Female [...],” culminating in “the ultimate delight of the World to Come [...].” (Kaplan, 131-2).

Cowen’s use of Kabbalistic imagery proposes a reconstruction of *Ein Sof*, the ultimate truth and originally undefinable, as made comprehensible by the meeting of bodies. The speaker’s lover takes on the connotations of the rose, as *Zen Unpin*, transmitting the energy of the higher *sefirot* to *Malchut*, which is represented by the speaker. Within this fleshly logos she observes both “Judge’s anguish & disappointment stern / [...] And mercy—“ (L17,19) in her lover, as products of balance, revealed as *Tiferete*. This culmination of spirit and flesh becomes an intermediate force between *Ein Sof* and herself, in which she is “Embracing the first truth of love” (L21). Metaphorically, Cowen’s speaker experiences a spiritual awakening and acceptance of love that parallels the divine. While unfathomable within familiar religious rules of conduct, the integration of the acroamatic mysticism of the Kabbalah completely disregards these rules from the outset.

The liberation from religious constructs’ authority over the body, constructs that Cowen herself felt obstructed by, is emphasized by the image of her speaker’s “Heavy arms of dreamer” (L20) reaching out for the ‘truth of love.’ The image itself is depicted as a dream-like escapism that bear a resemblance to a state of intoxication, and she is “Confused / On Anyone/ By its embrace” (L23-4). These last few lines, in particular, accentuates the logic and incentive of Cowen’s rhetoric: to free the body from the restrains of westernized religious thought, and merge sexual expression and religious spirituality into one boundless and ethereal experience. The sudden confusion sparked by the speaker’s realization reiterates the unlikelihood of its occurrence (as in real-life), that is, if one were to adhere to the very

constructs that Cowen sets out to re-write. Consequently, the sheer bliss of the narrative's conclusion reflects the essence of the *Re-Write* in that the impossible is rendered possible through poetic re-imagining: Graciously / Drawing it out of them / Truth impossible awake" (L25-7).

Truth is something that throughout *The Re-Write* can appear indefinite or flexible. Continuously changing in accordance with Cowen's integration of different interpretations of the sacred, religious truth as advocated by the Church, is re-written to accommodate an entirely new perspective on sexuality and the material body. By adopting the speech of Judeo-Christian institutional language, both through symbolism and performative language akin to prayer, Cowen re-imagines fleshly desire as an expression of the divine. The metaphorical heroin injection in "Dear God [...]," or the synthesis of sex and *Tiferete* in "Rose Man," are both examples of Cowen's continuous push towards metaphysical rationalization in an effort to unburden these expressions of western notions of sanctity, thus freeing her own body and femininity from the constraints of religious constructs.

5. Conclusion

The proto-feminist act of self-recovery, as described by Ronna C. Johnson in "Mapping Women Writers of the Beat Generation," is probably the best indirect criticism of Beat scholarship's de facto nurturement of masculinity: a critique shaped from within, in which eluded female writers inserted themselves within the canon as if they had never been ignored in the first place. For argument's sake, there is definitely a correlating line to be drawn between writers like Joyce Johnson and Janine Pommy Vega, and the years that passed between Cowen's suicide and the time in which they saw their own work anthologized and appreciated by scholars and critics. Johnson herself notes that "[...] if Elise had been born ten years later it would have made a tremendous difference" (2007, 124), and her death inevitably

denied her the chance to capitalize on feminist subjectivity and self-recovery.

The image imposed on her name is questionable. The ‘mad-girlfriend,’ Cowen’s archetypal description in the story of Allen Ginsberg, has highlighted her story as nothing particularly worth one’s attention: at least nothing more than an anecdote in extended readings of Ginsberg’s biography. The level of insignificance that has been attributed to Cowen, as an ingredient in collectively understanding Ginsberg’s biographical narrative, suggests a rhetoric that has been unnecessary to both parties. In regard to Foucault, the narrative of Allen and Elise proffered by Beat biographers does not alter readings of Ginsberg’s poetry, and is thus irrelevant. Neither does it emphasize Cowen’s own poetic talents. But secondary biography, which still comes at the expense of textual readings of Cowen’s poetry to this day, has despite its refusal to treat her seriously, created a mythical figure that intrigued scholars and academics, and equally obscured her as it has kept her name alive. One would think that if Cowen was as insignificant as she has been made out to be, her inclusion in biographies on Ginsberg, for instance, would have been deemed unnecessary.

My discussion on what I called ‘classroom-dissection,’ in analysis of Beat poetry, does of course indicate a tendency to the contrary, in which minute biographical detail and cultural references have been deemed critical to fully comprehend poems like ‘Howl.’ Despite not saying much about Cowen’s own life, her rather one-sided biographical accounts are more than adequate in discerning the forces that marginalized her talents in her own time. In reading the fragments left for posterity, the mere ninety-one poems that make up *Elise Cowen: Poems & Fragments*, it is also clear that Cowen was no acentric Beat poet. While Cowen’s poetry often builds upon a Beat ethos of transgressing authority, social institutions and constructs, I have pointed out three different thematic groupings in which her poetry can be read. Although they are by no means the only way one can approach her work, I believe these chapters provide a continuity in which one lends itself to the other and reveals the

framework that comes to define her poetic narratives.

The absence of material, in that most of Cowen's work has been lost, is the thesis' most apparent limitation. Such insufficient data can only allow assumptions, and it might not be desirable to state that the poems at our disposal can fully define her poetic voice. However, I would argue that the content of *Elise Cowen: Poems & Fragments* is most often structured around a wide-ranging polemic on defining the self, and in that I see a poetic discourse that is thematically unified at its core. Within this discourse, Cowen elaborates on different aspects of her life in which she both questions and asserts the role of femininity. While she leans on several Beat ethea in her attempts to speak up against postwar middle-class values, she is simultaneously forced to question her ability in doing so as a woman, to re-write the gender constructs which do not affect her male peers, and thus to assert what Trigilio calls authority-within-transgression (2002, 124).

Cowen's poetry is equally powerful in its ability to indirectly outline female marginalization, by re-imagining the language of the cultural institutions that promote such a rhetoric, as in its more direct treatment of its ramifications on the psyche. *Death Lives* is probably the only instance in which Cowen's own biography is in danger of overextending itself on account of her suicide. The moth-imagery, as well as that of the cockroach, traces Cowen's own fascination with death, and as apparitions of the afterlife, the insect-imagery is the cornerstone of the pathway-narrative that is prevalent throughout most of the first two chapters.

The moth, for instance, is not necessarily just a grey-winged creature, but a pathway to happiness in the form of a butterfly of blue light. Death becomes a form of escapism through metempsychosis, in which the cultural and religious constructs are rendered redundant to the re-incarnated speaker. She finds comfort in the fact that death is a moth that perpetuates life as a cool stream of air, and that the cockroach is metaphorically eternal, because if death is a

place free from the soul's physical embodiment, the speaker, as an extension of Cowen, won't have to deal with the repercussions of rebellion and free sexual expression. Consequently, her innermost-self is not defined by her physical body, but as made apparent in *The Air Shaft*, that is usually not the image perpetuated by postwar America.

This chapter is essentially working within the same thematic structure as *Death Lives*. The obvious difference is that instead of prescribing a solution, the poems in *The Air Shaft* delineate the psychological trauma, detachment, and self-reflection caused by the forces which entice death-as-a-pathway in the previous chapter. Cowen's voice changes in that it becomes more observational, and instead of outlining an escape from reality, she views life unfold in two separate directions. The obfuscation of the speaker's view in "The Steam [...]" is probably Cowen's most visual analogy of the difficulty in discerning her own life situation. But the air-shaft-imagery in "If I Never [...]" or "Third Day [...]", or the white rag in "From the Brown [...]", become pathways in their own right: the speaker is now able to visualize how the constructs which define the life she avoids equally manifest themselves in her own. As a result, it really does not matter whether she adopts the Beat lifestyle, because life nevertheless appears immobile and circulatory as in "Did I Go Mad [...]."

Cowen's increasing use of juxtaposed imagery is also similar to the two-sided view on the afterlife in *Death Lives*: the emphasis put on both insect and speaker's shared need for attachment, and the cockroach metaphorical embodiment of the social outcast as her insect parallel, suggest that death is as equally undecided as it is promising. I have hence structured these chapters to emphasize the thematic coherency that dictates Cowen's poetic legacy, which itself should illustrate that there was much more to Cowen than what most Beat critical literature would suggest.

Amassing critical observations on female detachment and the speaker's unrealized potential would also indicate a contingency to resolve these issues. Cowen's narrative in "I

Took [...]” tries to reconcile the points in question by analogously mimicking her peers and precursors through her speaker’s amalgamation of body parts. Despite her resoluteness, the project’s eventual failure is also Cowen’s most obvious critique of masculine ascendancy in the literary domain. The speaker’s actions result in her death, and considering Cowen’s own biography, one might also be inclined to consider death in *Death Lives* as an inevitable consequence of these forces, more so than a solution to them. “I Took [...]” is the thematic juncture in which Cowen’s narratives shift from consequence to resolution, and its extension to *The Re-Write* most clearly broadcasts the thematic unison of her poetic discourse.

Cowen did not live to recover her own voice within the Beat canon like Joyce Johnson, but her poetic discourse is marked by a proto-feminist rhetoric that within itself captures its own form of self-recovery. Self-assertion would possibly be a better term, and “I Took [...]” readily explains the sheer difficulty in infiltrating the Beat “boy gang” (Johnson,79). The explanatory image in *The Re-Write*’s introductory paragraphs suggests that while not changing her poetry’s thematic course, her narratives change from being observant and passively self-actualizing at best, to being self-assertive. The narrative shift happens on the level of language as Cowen expands her use of the contradictory discourses which in *The Air Shaft* and *Death Lives* was used to highlight a split in her speaker’s reality. These juxtapositions are merged and consolidated into a new kernel of meaning and extended to the discussion on antithetic parallelism.

The Re-Write is hence positioned last as one could view both *Death Lives* and *The Air Shaft* as a collective springboard of ideas in need of repositioning. *The Re-Write* is thus not a narrative break *per se*, but a shift in polemics. Cowen’s poetic rhetoric adopts the authority of the same constructs that marginalized her voice in *The Air Shaft*, but instead of trying to define the self within it, she asserts it with authority, e.g. rather than letting religion in “Dear God [...]” or “I Wanted [...]” define sexuality, sex itself becomes a pathway to religious

experience. Similarly, the adaptation of non-western religious thought in *Death Lives* is rejuvenated in *The Re-Write* to re-imagine the very foundations of the Judeo-Christian belief system through metaphysics and the Kabbalah, as made explicitly clear in “Teacher [...]” and “Rose Man.”

Ginsberg’s assumption about the Beats’ willingness to nurture a capable female poet was ultimately false. Attentiveness to textuality reveals that Elise Cowen was undoubtedly a poet in her own right, and someone who could easily ‘hold her own’ (the supposed criteria for admission into the Beat boy’s club). Judging by the extremely limited source material alone, Cowen was perhaps a poet who was even more thematically expansive and diverse than many of her male peers. Re-claiming her authorship can only be done through critical analysis of her poetry, and there is little hesitation in my mind, if her poetry is any indication, that the publication of *Elise Cowen: Poems & Fragments* will spark a process of recovery that eventually instills her deserved place in the Beat canon.

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² It appears as if *Poetry in the Song of Songs* is no longer part of their online collection. Chapters were downloaded in pdf format and printed in 2017.

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