Androgyny, Anatomy and the Poetics of Absence in *Kim Addonizio’s “First Poem for You”*

I shall speak about women’s writing: about what it looks like and what it can do. Of course the danger is that our discussion will turn either wholly on the politics of sexual discourse, and thus rob writing of its aesthetic standing, or wholly on the speculative and theoretical, defining the female voice using beautiful but terribly unspecific, abstract language. What must be done then is a grappling with women’s language—with *écriture féminine*—that carefully analyzes its specific, feminine aesthetics while taking into account its ramifications within the potential reader and within the larger discussion of gender identity.

Specifically, we will look at Kim Addonizio’s English sonnet “First Poem for You,” in which a genderless speaker addresses a genderless beloved. During the fourteen lines of the poem the speaker fascinates her/himself with the tattoos of her/his lover, at times expanding on the specific imagery of the tattoos, at others meditating on the blue ink’s permanence in comparison with love’s tendency to “[turn] to pain” (Addonizio, *The Philosopher’s Club* Line 12). We will find that the poem is an example of *écriture féminine* not because of an overt, male-miming “proclamation” of its own womanhood, but because it writes through the body of the body,
because it makes space for the female and male reader through its subjecting gaps, because it can, to borrow a phrase from Cixous, merge with anonymity without annihilating itself (*The Laugh of the Medusa* 1652).

The fact that Addonizio chose the sonnet form requires our attention—since Addonizio is a “contemporary” poet and thus required to be repulsed by the very idea of form poetry. She is supposed to believe form to be restrictive to the contemporary voice, and because she is a woman, surely she must see the sonnet as a creation of the patriarchal system of misogyny and woe! But the genius of a woman is to turn the entire system on its head and use it to her own purposes. Again, to borrow from Cixous, Addonizio is not appropriating an essentially patriarchal form, but instead she “explode[s] it, turn[s] it around, and seize[s] it” (Ibid. 1651), she makes it her own.

Of course, I mean “explodes it” quite literally—nearly every line in the sonnet is enjamed, the sole exception found in the poem’s concluding couplet. Additionally, her rhymes are slanted, resonant in relatively wild and liberal ways. There is something distinctly feminine to both of these gestures. In concerns to enjambment, the lines have a tendency to become lengthened in their breath, to flow together—conforming to Cixous’s vision of the woman’s text as one “shot through with streams of song” (Ibid. 1648). And in regards to the liberalness of Addonizio’s slant rhymes, she seems to be calling into question our need for precise echoes, the strictures of music—just as she calls into question the strictures of concretely constructed gender within the poem (more on this later).

This continuity of line reminds us of the body’s fluidity—how the arm is not distinct from the torso, but instead flows into it; and the liberality of the rhyme reminds us of how different body parts echo each other architecturally—how the hand is similar and also altogether different from the foot. We begin to see how appropriate the choice of the sonnet form was—being a form, the sonnet is like the body, based on some changeable formula, and like the beloved’s body, the poem is littered with beautiful and inked lines which flow across the skin and offer a limitless imaginary.

Addonizio, as a poet interested in the anatomy of form, endows her speaker with a similar interest in the anatomy of him/herself and the beloved. In fact, almost constantly, we find the speaker guiding the reader toward the body. Take the opening sentence for an example: “I love to touch your tattoos in complete / darkness, when I can’t see them” (Addonizio, *The Philosopher’s Club* Lines 1-2). Undeniably, the speaker fixates not only on his/her own body (the speaker’s true love is touch) but also on the body of the beloved, since this is the object of the speaker’s touch. In this way, the speaker not only writes his/her own body into existence but also the body of the beloved.

Note, however, that the scene is cast “in complete / darkness.” We conclude then that pleasure is taken only from the external sensation of the flesh and not the mere and voyeuristic view of things, not the sense of sight, not the internalization of external light, the reduction of object to mental refraction. In darkness, the body escapes the reductive parsimony of the symbolic order, it escapes that order’s need to classify and
define—it escapes because the body's signifier (the tattoos) exists only as a recreation of the speaker's imagination, his/her memory, while the signified is immediately, sensually available. And, as it undermines the symbolic order, the body enters an almost imaginary realm where its transformations and boundaries are nonfinite. Addonizio's speaker further illustrates this fact as she/he becomes enraptured with the imaginary impulse, casting “lines of lightning,” “blue swirls of water,” “a dragon” and “a serpent” (Ibid. Lines 4-7) onto the body of the beloved. Yet even in this vortex of the imaginary, the speaker grounds him/herself within the bounds of the body. Never is a fantastical image presented without its corporeal correlate—we do not get lightning without the “nipple” or the serpent without the “shoulder” (Ibid. Line 5-6)—the images are actually present, paired with reality, they are “in the skin” (Ibid. Line 10). Thus, while the speaker escapes the symbolic and extends into the imaginary, he/she never leaves the bounds of the body or stops writing the body into existence. And, it is this fact, this corporeal, sensual fixation which qualifies the sonnet as écriture feminine, as a direct response to Cixous's challenge to “[w]rite your self. Your body must be heard” (The Laugh of the Medusa 1646).

Yet we have not even approached with any precision the most interesting aspect of “First Poem for You”—that is, the absence of gender in the poem, its androgyny. Of course, this absence is not enough to be shocking in itself; plenty of poetry lacks a gendered speaker, object and/or subject. But when one compounds this absence with the overt sensuality of the poem, when one realizes that the entire poem orbits around touch, the absence of gender in the speaker and the beloved becomes both strange and enticing. Ever since the Sumerian priestess carved the oldest surviving love poem, starting “Bridegroom, dear to my heart, Goody is your beauty, honeysweet” (Arsu)—since Song of Solomon constructed distinctly gendered voices to carry out the dance of passion—since Shakespeare told us of his mistress' eyes—the language of love has been a language of gender. To directly frustrate this tradition while remaining within a traditional form, a form synonymous with love poetry, requires not only audacity but skill.

No doubt that the exact effects of this deliberate frustration will be argued over. Many will feel the temptation to prove that Addonizio seeks to decenter and destroy our dualistic, concrete concepts of sexuality; that by effacing gender, Addonizio seeks to do away with it altogether. Doubtless, you will become better friends with Judith Butler for making such a claim, but in regards to constructing an upstanding argument, you'll leave much to be desired. For one, the argument fails to take into account Addonizio as a poet, as the creator of not only “First Poem for You” but also poems like “What Do Women Want?,” where we find the poet proclaiming, “I want to walk like I'm the only / woman on earth and I can have my pick” (Tell Me Lines 14-15). Surely a poet so concerned with her identity as a woman among men would not do away so easily with her sex or her gender. And, secondly, an argument declaring that Addonizio has disregarded biological sex or socially constructed gender has already forgotten that the poem circulates around the body—and
the body, especially the body within the rapture of the sex act, usually includes genitalia. To ignore gender in the poem simply because it is hidden is like ignoring a lover’s genitalia just because she/he is wearing underpants; it won’t get you very far.

A tighter argument might be made, however, if one considers the absence not as an absence at all, but rather as an Iserian gap:

Indeed, it is only through inevitable omissions that a story gains its dynamism. Thus whenever the flow is interrupted and we are led off in unexpected directions, the opportunity is given to us to bring into play our own faculty for establishing connections. (Iser 1005)

So the question becomes about how we as readers fill in the gap that Addonizio creates when she refuses to assign gender to her speaker or to the beloved. Do we honestly see sexless, castrated dolls copulating into a plasticized infinity? Or do we assign sexes to the speaker and the beloved? And what is the process of this assigning? Are we projecting our own sexuality into the poem? Or do we conflate Addonizio with her speaker, assigning her a bedfellow as an amateur matchmaker would, based on the people we happen to know, especially those who might like to have a poet-girlfriend? The point is not that we answer these questions, that we definitively identify the gender of the speaker and the beloved—but rather that these questions exist, that Addonizio asks us to be open to many possible sexual permutations, that the poem compels many different readings that include all the possible combinations of male, female and/or otherwise.

In short, Addonizio creates not only an infinite imaginary for the body cloaked in darkness; she also creates an infinite imaginary of meaning and identity, a veritable thematic “kaleidoscope” (Iser 1005)—created, it should be said, from what she does not say, the gaps. Again, the poem confirms Cixous’s vision of *écriture feminine*; the poem is “not simple partial objects but a moving, limitlessly changing ensemble, a cosmos tirelessly traversed by Eros” (*The Laugh of the Medusa* 1652). The poem, like the body draped in blind darkness, is richer for what we cannot see.

And while we may be willing to leave this plaything of a poem in the bedroom, it would do Addonizio a disservice were we not to consider the wider ramifications that the poem creates in the world of sexual discourse. It is in this discursive arena that we too often confuse what is arbitrary with what is nonexistent. Just because there is no Platonic, universal image of “woman” that every person with a vagina must attempt to impersonate does not mean that every person with a vagina feels free of the pressure to conform to a vague, pseudo-universal concept of womanhood—that is to say, we cannot simply blink gender categories into nonexistence. The challenge then is finding how to create the maximum amount of freedom for both men and women within an inherited language that has always favored one gender over another. Addonizio’s poem suggests a method: rather than deny gender altogether or favor one, she includes both—she “admits there is an other” while veiling “sexual difference insofar as this is perceived as the mark of a mythical separation” (Cixous, *The Newly Born Woman* 351-352). In short, Addonizio
provides a space where each reader may project whatever gender she/he pleases, where we are free to explore the vast chaosmos of our own identity and orientation without being assigned the roles of lover or beloved, woman or man, homosexual or heterosexual. In so doing, Addonizio escapes “the reductive stinginess of the masculine-conjugal subjective economy” (Cixous, The Laugh of the Medusa 1652) and allows arbitrary identity to exist in an actual, corporeal way.

Most important, however, is that this poem exists on a forefront—a frontier where gender and sexuality exist without limiting existence itself. It must not be the only one. Just as patriarchy was not instituted by a single epic poem, a lingual/sexual revolution cannot be achieved by fourteen lines alone. Instead, we must take the suggestion of the poem—that androgyny is not the death of identity but its freedom—and integrate it into our own life and work, opening ourselves and others to the multifarious pleasures of erotic diffusion, where attraction is not stilted and fixed but gamboling and adventurous. In such a way, we push our gendered language towards a point of crisis—a “volta” of sorts where the entire discourse discovers a new day.

Works Cited


