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Safely Dead?

The Dead Woman as a Muse in the Works of Victorian Women
Poets and Contemporary Musician Polly Jean Harvey

When I undertook this research project I didn’t expect to be haunted. But in the face of countless images of dead and dying women depicted as aesthetic objects, I regularly hosted the coldest of chills down my back, cold enough to frighten the most boiling of days in Tel Aviv. Surrounded by nineteenth century art books and poetry in the library, there was a dead woman everywhere I looked; anonymous and safely buried under the oblivion of ‘the canon’. Those images, whether constructed in a poem or painting, aroused an array of conflicting emotions; repulsion-attraction, appreciation-condemnation, just to name a few. It is this emotional disquiet which drives my academic endeavor, where I make an attempt to understand the poetic and cultural dynamics underlying the emergence of the tradition connecting death, women and the aesthetic, but more importantly, to recognize a varied and powerful resistance to it through a close reading of the works of Victorian women poets and contemporary musician, PJ Harvey.

In classical Greek culture the function of the muse was to “…point out to the conception of the poet’s gift [of writing] as being dependent on an appeal to a higher power than itself” (Bronfen 362). The poet merely served as a medium for the muse’s speech, thereby excluding the possibility for the poet to become self sufficient. A two-way exchange between muse and poet was thus established: the muse “…inspires or animates his poetic power, so that he may, by virtue of his invocation, in turn reanimate the muse” (Bronfen 363). The classical muse was divine and always
beyond reach, and through her the poet received his knowledge about death. Across the centuries, the muse gradually became incorporated into the poet and her creative energy was shifted to him. Rather than the muse invoking creative genius, we have the poet invoking the muse and controlling her. The muse transforms from divine to secular being with a concrete body. In the eighteenth century, the muse no longer offers her song but her body and the poet assumes “…ultimate control over the departed woman” (Bronfen 365). In the nineteenth century the woman’s presence marks the absence of poetic action and her absence, the presence of it: “The poet must choose between a corporally present woman and the muse, a choice of the former precluding the latter” (Bronfen 362). The death of a woman gives birth to a text which does not commemorate her absence but rather celebrates the poet’s poetic gift and preserves a reanimated version of the dead beloved.

The formal tradition of connecting death, femininity and aesthetic can be traced back to Edgar Allen Poe. In his essay The Philosophy of Composition Edgar Allen Poe unfolds before his contemporaries the ‘making of’ his infamous poem The Raven, promoting the idea that a poem does not come about by an act of frenzy or slippery muse, but rather a careful “…step by step…” construction, with the “…precision and rigid consequence of a mathematical problem” (261). In analyzing the poetic elements of The Raven, Poe articulated the beginning of a male poetic tradition of connecting death, femininity and beauty, which rapidly grew more and more prevalent in the nineteenth century in both poetry and art. Poe first identifies Beauty as the “…sole legitimate province of the poem”, arguing that the contemplation of the beautiful comprises the “…atmosphere and the essence of the poem” (263). He then moves on to identify the ideal tone of a poem, and concludes that “…in its highest manifestation… tone is one of sadness. Beauty of whatever kind,
in its supreme development, invariably excites the sensitive soul to tears. Melancholy is thus the most legitimate of all the poetical tones” (263). The natural progression of his argument leads Poe to determine that beauty and death together comprise the most poetical theme a poem can offer: “…the death … of a beautiful woman is, unquestionably, the most poetical topic in the world – and equally is it beyond doubt that the lips best suited for such topic are those of a bereaved lover” (265). Poe provides his readers with a formula for a successful poem, but does not fully explain the ‘obvious’ choice of variables in his equation. What exactly is it that makes the depiction of a dead woman a sensational aesthetic moment?

In his extensive study of the phenomenon, Bram Dijkstra suggests that the feminine ideal in the nineteenth century, governed by a rigid gender hierarchy, was that of a weak, sickly woman, whose physical invalidism implied superior spirituality and mental purity. “For many a Victorian husband…” says Dijkstra, “…his wife’s physical weakness came to be evidence… of her physical and mental purity” (25). This feminine ideal was closely tied with upper middle class conventions and was therefore not only associated with spirituality, but with prosperity as well: “The cult of feminine invalidism… was both among men and women inextricably associated with suggestions of wealth and success” (Dijkstra 28). For a culture, then, which conceived of a woman’s virtue to reside in her capacity for invalidism, her death naturally became a climatic and dramatic moment of spirituality and self actualization. As Dijkstra notes:

Poets and artists everywhere drove women to go even further in their acts of sacrifice. As every properly trained, self denying woman knew, true sacrifice found its logical apotheosis in death. The absence of exercise, the dusty housebound environment, and the deliberate shunning of sunlight and fresh air had created a new breed of women who could virtually not exist unattended by nurses and servants. Inevitably, many of these women contracted actual diseases…and were doomed…to a life which must have seemed for them to be no more than a long, protracted process of dying. (28-29)
To our twenty-first century frame of thought, which so heavily celebrates life-in-action, self fulfillment in death is inconceivable. However, we are still romantically fascinated by documentations of the dead, attracted to the idea that they may offer a personalized, eternal trace of individuality, something we are so keen to leave behind us. That is how I tried to see those depictions of dead women; seeking comfort in their ‘eternal individualized beauty’. The only problem was that they never quite seemed to come across as individuals, no matter how hard I tried to see them as such. Where and how did they lose their identity? Dijkstra, in his discussion of Paul-Albert Besnard’s painting *The Dead Woman* (55), begins to answer the question:

> Under the guise of documentary concern, Besnard has robbed this woman of even the dignity of privacy on her death bead. In consequence, she must forever remain ‘Besnard’s Dead Woman,’ not an individuated person. The painter, in coolly documenting her at this moment, has effectively obliterated her personal identity, turning her into another crushed Ophelia, helplessly and anonymously fading into her pillows, as if these were the waters of oblivion (54).

Elizabeth Bronfen, in her book *Over Her Dead Body*, takes this argument further and claims that when the artist chooses to practice his mourning through the documentation of the body of his beloved, he violently reduces her to an object, taking away the focus from her pain and directing it to his creative power:

> What is violent about this rhetoric is that it displaces the point of view on to a formal level; that the pain, the courage of the dying woman is subordinated to notions of artistic ability and aesthetic effect. This is a form of violence which stages the absence of violence, a move that allows the painter and spectator to ignore that painful battle of a dying woman. It allows a blindness toward the real by privileging the beautiful play of forms, lines, colours. (50-51)
Nineteenth century women poets were concerned with resisting this male artistic tradition. Their resistance was reflected in both the mere act of writing and in their thematic choices. Struggling with a rigid gender hierarchy and attempting to establish a feminine framework of poetics, has been a major theme in the works of Victorian women poets. The sexist society of the Victorians dictated a rule that if a woman was to write poetry it was necessary for her “…to be proven virtuously female to legitimize her vocation as a poet” (Ostriker 15). As Alicia Ostriker says in her book *Stealing the Language*:

In the nineteenth century the genteel poetry and the genteel ideal of femininity, which stressed the heart and denied the head, was a perfect glass slipper; those who were not Cinderella had to shed blood to fit it, and these wounds are not healed yet (15).

Nevertheless, both Christina Rossetti and Elizabeth Barrett Browning, two prominent Victorian women poets, were far more concerned in their works with the realities of life than with the beauties of nature and other topics that constitute sentimental poetry. Many of Barrett Browning’s poems are political and “…protest what she considered unjust social conditions” (www.cswnet.com/~erin/ebbio.htm). Rossetti, despite many of her religious poems, shared with Barrett Browning the ‘double mischief’ of the female poet, “…struggling for credibility in a century that gave no room to women-poets”. In a great deal of her poetry she chose to deal with “…loneliness, betrayal, despair, sickness and death” (Jones x). It is interesting to note that paradoxically, Browning and Rossetti’s voices, together with the emergence of feminist politics towards the end of the nineteenth century, did not serve to destroy the dead woman ideal, but rather, as Dijkstra points out, brought about a strong counter-action in which “…counter images of women ill, dying or already safely dead proliferated” (Dijkstra 31).
Browning and Rossetti were two Victorian women poets who ‘made it’ into the post-feminist canon of Victorian poetry and whom traditionally, have been selected to reflect the female voice of the period. However, as Virginia Blain claims, in an introduction to a Victorian women poets anthology she edited, “[o]ver the last five or ten years… increasing numbers of women poets have been rediscovered, and it is now being recognized that Victorian readers and critics paid much more attention to the work of these women than was previously thought” (1). I therefore find it necessary to review their ‘dead women’ work alongside the canonical ones, and expose a wider spectrum of resisting voices. But why stretch my argumentation to include an analysis of a contemporary woman musician such as PJ Harvey? How can one justify this literary dialogue? The straightforward answer would be: because it’s there. When Harvey for instance, stages one of her album covers as a variation on a Nineteenth century painting featuring a dead woman (Cover of To Bring You My Love appendix 2), the literary dialogue unmistakably emerges. As Karen Alkaly-Gut claims in her paper Literary Dialogues: Rock and Victorian Poetry, “A comparison of the lyrics of rock songs with poems from the Victorian literary canon reveals an extraordinary similarity of subject and technique and results in an unusual illumination both genres” (1). Although Harvey works and creates in what seems to be a different gender defined culture, and uses different channels to reach her audience, she explores the same thematic notions and gender related problems as the Victorian women poets, on her way to establish a feminine artistic self. She explores themes of “…sex, love and religion with unnerving honesty, dark humor and twisted theatricality”, often manipulating the media with “…disturbingly sexy photo sessions, which subvert traditional concepts of female sexuality” (www.mtv.com/bands/az/harvey_pj/bio.jhtml).
The protagonists in Harvey’s songs are always carefully constructed and never accidental. Harvey likes her characters with blurred gender identities, using “…dual-sexed narrators” and leaving the listener with confusing stories, which are “…fuelled equally by the fires of female and male, hetero and homosexual desire” (Mazullo 431). Harvey is also fascinated with death: be it the death of a man, a woman, an androgynous persona, or the violent act of killing itself. What is interesting for me about Harvey’s work is that it serves as a continuation of a particular female poetic resistance and adds a contemporary understanding to it. Harvey’s addition is her interest with the process of dying, through which she exposes a modern ‘killing’ of the woman. One of the most interesting albums to study as a whole from a literary perspective, is Harvey’s debut album *Dry*, which has inspired some academic work and is regarded by critics as an epic and mythic concept album.
Death is a universal poetic topic, shared equally by male and female poets. One of the first differences, however, that is notable when a woman poet writes about death, is the way she regards her absence of the self. Ostriker notes that while the male perspective regards the ‘non self’ in relation to the universe (nobody in relation to god, nature), the female perspective tries to establish a ‘non social self’; “She is not Nothing compared to Something, but Nobody Compared to Somebody” (Ostriker 60), usually a man. In her poem *After Death* for example, Christina Rossetti’s speaker is a dead woman describing the man she loves as he approaches her death bed to see her for the last time. The poem ends with the following lines:

He did not love me living; but once dead
He pitied me; and very sweet it is
To know he still is warm though I am cold. (Rossetti 293)

The dead speaker is not concerned with universal contemplations about the mysteries of death, but rather focuses on registering her sense of identity as marginal, as non existent, in relation to her object of desire, her man. Despite the ironical tone criticizing the “conventional view of pure sacrificial, womanly love”, these final lines can either imply that the speaker does accept “that she is so much less than her male beloved” (scholars.nus), or point to a possibility of empowerment through death. The speaker’s death entails a sense of control over the bereaved.

Read in the context of works of male poets such as Browning’s *Porphyria’s Lover*, Tennyson’s *Lady of Shalott* or Dante Gabriel Rossetti’s *The Blessed Damozel*, who use male voices that speak of their longed-for dead women, Rossetti’s poem seems even more disturbing. Rossetti’s speaker is the muse herself, that has so far been mute and perfect, providing the reader with what seems to be the real account of things when she is dead, and voicing women who have died for love without knowing male admiration. The speaker offers the perception that “…romantic love tends to
submerge rather than fulfill a woman’s identity…Still, to be without an admirer, as every young woman learns, is to be Nobody” (Ostriker 61).

When the speaker in the poem is the dead woman rather than the bereaved lover, another channel - psychoanalytical - is activated. Rossetti’s poem is disturbing in more than just one sense, mainly because it manages to destabilize, and therefore expose, the scopophilic pleasure of the reader. Scopophilia, according to Freud, becomes activated through a conflictual process by which sexual instincts take over non-erotogenic areas (eyes, in this case) and ‘enslave’ them to receive gratification from looking. Other people will then be objectified to serve the persisting need of scopophilia. In traditional nineteenth century depictions of dead women (by male artists, that is), the spectator/reader is exposed to an image through the mediation of a male gaze, which carries all the cultural-erotic-fetishistic values discussed earlier. In Laura Mulvey’s terms, “the man controls the [film] fantasy and also emerges as the representative of power in a further sense: as the bearer of the look of the spectator…” (6). By identifying with the bearer of the look, says Mulvey, the spectator is able to further serve his scopohilic urge through his fascination with “…the image of his like set in an illusion of natural space, and through him gaining control and possession of the woman within the diegesis” (7).

What Rossetti does in her poem is add another mediation of the look, another bearer of look. Instead of a bereaved lover, whom, according to Poe’s formula, should control the subject of the poem for best aesthetic results, we get the dead woman

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1 For the purpose of this discussion I am assuming that poetry is capable of generating a visual image in the reader’s mind, which can be said to function as a pictorial image.
herself speaking for herself and about her lover. As a result, both channels\(^2\) that constitute the male gaze and which can provide erotic pleasure, are destabilized and exposed. For the scopophilic channel, the woman-object is not as static and controlled as she ought to be in order to serve the scopophilic drive. Her ‘resurrection’ comes in the way of the sexual instincts, serving as a reminder of opposing ego ideas. The dead woman on the one hand and her resurrected voice on the other, can be said to give rise to the original conflict that brought about the scopophilic urge. Once the conflict has surfaced, the dead woman as erotic object is no longer accessible; she constitutes too much of a threat for the spectator.

The narcissistic channel usually available for the spectator is also destroyed by Rossetti (or any other Poem which substitutes the bereaved lover speaker with a woman). The dead woman speaks instead of a bereaved lover, however, what is interesting here is that the identification channel is not entirely missing from the poem; Rossetti leaves a trace of it, reminding us of its possibilities and foregrounding the subversive force in her poem. The lover is not absent altogether, on the contrary, he is very much present, but Rossetti does not give him a voice, a controlling power. In Lacan’s terms, the male reader (or the woman reader who is culturally educated in the male gaze), is deprived of the gratification that follows the mirror stage, in which the infant, playing in front of a mirror, gradually realizes its own reflection. Rather, she dramatizes the absence of this option, taking away from the erotic dramatization of her male contemporaries of the dead female body.

\(^2\) I am referring here to Laura Mulvey’s scheme for pleasure in looking; one which is scopophilia, and the other narcissistic identification.
In another poem, *At Home*, Rossetti’s speaker is yet another dead woman who returns to her house as a spirit, watching her living friends and listening to their conversations. The speaker painfully describes her friends’ ‘jois des vivre’, as they celebrate life drinking, feasting and laughing. But on top of everything, it is love that keeps them alive; being loved is what differentiates the dead from the living. In the first stanza it is only implied that love equals life: “They sang, they jested, and they laughed, For each was loved of each” (Rossetti 339), however, in the last stanza the speaker clearly notes that it is love, or rather the lack of it, that has killed her:

I shivered comfortless, but cast
No chill across the tablecloth;
I all-forgotten shivered, sad
To stay and yet to part how loth:
I passed from the familiar room,
I who from love had passed away,
Like the remembrance of a guest
That tarryeth but a day. (Rossetti 339)

The notion of sacrificial womanly love is repeated in this poem, with the tension between the critical tone on the one hand, and the acceptance of the woman’s weak and inevitable position on the other, with the ultimate realization that “…the vocation of love keeps women weak, passive and humanly crippled” (Ostriker 60), not to mention dead. Furthermore, lines like: “I, only I, had passed away: ‘To-morrow and to-day,’ they cried; I was of yesterday,” or “I shivered comfortless, but cast no chill across the tablecloth;” (399), depict the speaker’s selflessness and invisibility, having no effect on the living, and being Rossetti’s implied comment that “…invisibility and muteness” (Ostriker 63) articulate the woman’s condition. The speaker is long forgotten even in her own home; not quite the longed-for dead beautiful woman traditionally praised by male poets.

Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s poem *A Year’s Spinning*, depicts an even more explicit picture of the condition of the Victorian woman through the theme of death.
Browning’s tendency towards political poetry has generated many works that addressed one of the central social problems of her time: the status of the educated woman in Victorian society. This poem is a sarcastic mini-narrative about a young woman who is wooed by a young man, has his baby without marrying him, and both she and her baby end up dead. The story unfolds in seven stanzas, each stanza ending with a variation of the ironical refrain: “And now my spinning is all done” (Norton 1915), sharply contrasting the gentle, docile role a woman must play in front of the public eye, with the morbid narrative in which her death is no less than the monstrous result of that particular traditional society. The speaker transforms from virgin to sinner/whore, and therefore approaches her inevitable death. In this poem, Browning does not only reverse the artistic tradition of the dead woman as a muse, but also responds to an extensive masculine mythical narrative in which women assume the role of either a virgin or a whore.

It is particularly interesting to take a close look at the last three stanzas of this poem, in which the speaker provides instructions regarding her burial:

Bury me ‘twixt my mother’s grave,
(Who cursed me on her death-bed lone)
And my dead baby’s (God it save!)
Who, not to bless me, would not moan.
And now my spinning is all done.

A stone upon my heart and head,
But no name written on the stone!
Sweet neighbours, whisper low instead,
“This sinner was a loving one-
And now her spinning is all done.”

And let the door ajar remain,
In case he should pass by anon;
And leave the wheel out very plain,-
That HE, when passing in the sun,
May see the spinning is all done. (Norton 1916)
Her heart and head are doomed to the same fate; if her lover’s love for her has died, then so must she. She ironically adds that she does not wish to be remembered by her name, the identity of a sinner, but rather by her love and her accomplished spinning duties. This non-identity further establishes the myth of the dead sinner; it is not the story of one particular woman, but the universal condition of women. Furthermore, when a stanza earlier the speaker wishes to be buried between her mother and baby, the poet portrays a scene of three generations of women whose voices have been silenced. Browning is suggesting here a circularity of the female position in which women silence other women and therefore serve to reinforce their own devaluation. The theme of circularity is also obvious throughout the poem in the repeated image of the spinning wheel. In the last stanza, however, the speaker does not come to terms with her fate and goes against it by trying to manipulate her lover even after her death. Unlike Rossetti’s speaker, who finds comfort in knowing that her lover is warm though she is cold, Browning’s speaker still hopes to arouse an emotional response in her lover by keeping the seduction scene, with the spinning wheel in the centre, alive after her death.

Like Browning’s poem, PJ Harvey’s Dry tells the story of a woman “…who, once chaste (or regarded as such), experiences sexual desire, and as a result of acting upon this desire, is drowned, by a man or herself” (Mazullo 431-432). The woman’s death in Dry is narrated in the last three songs of the album: Plants and Rags, Fountain and Water. The dying process of the whore in Dry begins with Plants and Rags, a song that doesn’t have the typical punk sound used by Harvey, but rather a “…dissonant cello part” (Mazullo 443) accompanied by a an acoustic guitar, generally producing a subtle, quiet sound that is nevertheless extremely disturbing.
Mark Mazullo, in his article *Revisiting the Wreck: PJ Harvey and the Drowned Virgin Whore*, claims that this song marks an entrance to the domestic sphere:

Indeed, from the opening sound of someone keeping time by tapping on a table, we are made aware that the male dominated world of the side’s first three songs is now being left behind. We are entering the home, the woman’s world (and perhaps, given the themes of artistry and creativity, the salon). The title alone of ‘Plants and Rags’ gives us some indication of her conflicted self-image: she is useful in her re-productivity but ultimately disposable. And this leads her to begin the difficult yet ecstatic journey toward re-communion with nature. (443)

Just like in Rossetti’s poem *At Home*, where the speaker’s memory is violated in her own home, Harvey too regards the home as a place where the woman cannot be protected: “House and home / Who thought they could take away that place? / Outside, and they lead us out quietly” (song 2 appendix 1). There is no such thing as a private or intimate domain for a woman; she is constantly exposed to and judged by rigid social standards.

The song begins with the lines: “Plants and rags / Ease myself into a body bag” (song 2 appendix 1), which can be interpreted as the sinner’s wish to escape her social shame through death. But I would also like to regard this as Harvey’s modern addition to her Victorian ‘sisters’. The disturbing phrase ‘Ease myself into a bodybag’, followed by “I dreamt of a man / He fed me fine food / He gave me shiny things” (song 2 appendix 1) can reflect the woman’s contribution to her own death; her everyday and natural agreement to the modern woman’s way of life, which gradually pave the way towards her death. The idea of self inflicted death, which comes across as soft and non-violent, calls to mind of some of Naomi Wolf’s theories discussed in her book *The Beauty Myth*. As women progress towards an era of independence and equal rights, claims Wolf, Western patriarchy produces different ‘backlashes’ to preserve their lack of confidence and enslave them to correcting their ‘faults’. One of those backlashes is concepts we hold today about beauty, and the
extent to which women are willing to go in order to preserve their beauty, undertaking self-violent measures such as hunger and plastic surgery. According to Wolf, women’s identity was historically achieved and defined through pain which was associated with labour. Today, however:

[i]n the strange new absence of female pain, the myth put beauty in its place. For as far as women could remember, something had hurt about being female. As of a generation ago, that became less and less true. But neither women nor the masculine social order could adapt so abruptly to a present in which femaleness was not characterized and defined by pain. Today, what hurts is beauty. (Wolf, 219)

Harvey likes to experiment with modern concepts of feminine beauty. On her album covers for instance, she presents herself in different staged poses in which she is at once ugly and beautiful (Appendix 2). Harvey dramatizes conventional ‘dress up’ and fashion symbolism and puts them to a test. The result is usually disquieting: no red dress, wet hair, accentuated lips or sexy lingerie, all traditional female seduction items, are left without some sort of sarcastic commentary. On the cover of Harvey’s 1995 Album To Bring You My Love (image 6 appendix 2) for example, Harvey appears as a dead woman floating on the water, wearing a brilliant red dress. The coupling of the dead woman floating in the water with this certain title not only resonates the theme of sacrificial womanly love, but also foregrounds the bloody role of the sexy red dress. Harvey is telling us that being attractive hurts. But who is this woman and why is she there? Is this Ophelia? Is this a “…transformed Dorothy finally landed in Oz” (Mazullo 438)? Or, is this again, a virgin who put on a sexy red dress for her man and ended up as a drowned whore? We only know that in one of the album’s songs, Down by the Water (song 5 appendix 1), the speaker (a man?) tells the story of a little “blue eyed girl” who “became blue eyed whore” and was drowned in water, after he had “to lose her / to do her harm”. There is an insinuated act of rape: “She said ‘no more’”, which is followed by an aggressive portrayal of the

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killing/death, as the girl fights for her life shouting and moaning. What is clear in any case, if we return to the album cover combined with the lyrics, is that Harvey is not interested in freezing moments of beauty. There is a story behind her women and images and she will not allow her audience the uncomplicated gratification from images of perfected and eternalized beauty. Her modernized version of the nineteenth-century beautiful dead woman has a double function; first, it forces us to refer back to the traditional versions and acknowledge the narrative behind the images, and second, it tells us that although our culture has undergone serious transformations, the issue is still very much relevant.

Rossetti was also interested in contaminating the `beautiful’ death scene with ugliness, so that a more realistic condition of the woman would emerge. In Two Thoughts of Death for example, Rossetti deliberately ‘dives into’ the dead woman’s grave and contrasts the woman’s fading beauty with concrete and sometimes repulsive imagery:

The earth must lie with such a cruel stress
On her eyes where the white lides used to press;
Foul worms fill up her mouth so sweet and red;
Fould worms are underneath her graceful head
Yet these, being born of her from nothingness
These worms are certainly flesh of her flesh. (Blain 141)

The woman speaker does not only provide a realistic image of the dead body, but finds great comfort in the body’s decaying process because it brings other forms of life into being, and in them lives on. The image of the dead woman here is everything but a frozen image of beauty: as her body rots and her beauty fades away the memory of her becomes more and more dynamic. In the second stanza, the speaker, inspired by her memory, plucks an anemone which turns into a moth in her hand and rises towards the sun. Once again she is filled with a vibrant memory and concludes:
“Then my heart answered me: Thou fool to say / That she is dead…” (Blain 142).

Rossetti is fighting the traditional stationary death scene in this poem, digging up the woman’s soul and personality, and it is this, not her beautiful body, which ultimately lives on and fuels the memory of her.

Augusta Webster, a far less recognized Victorian woman poet, dramatizes the woman’s death in *Passing Away* in a way which can be said to introduce another form of resistance. In *Passing Away*, as in Rossetti’s *After Death*, the scene is that of a dying woman with her lover beside her bed. The speaker in this poem is the dying woman who addresses her lover, sympathizes with his grief over losing her and tries to comfort him. In the process, she firmly establishes the place and position she occupied in their shared life, the void she will leave behind and most importantly, she manages to shape the sort of memory she wishes him to remember her by:

> How strangely lone you will feel in your home  
> When I have gone out of your waking days  
> And you dream of our life in a sorrowful maze  
> When the desolate evenings come.

> But, love, it cannot be lost,  
> The life that is ours, that I leave to you yours,  
> As something far more than a memory;  
> We know it something to real to die,  
> It is love, and love endures. (Blain 147)

This careful staging of her own life and death can be regarded as an expression of authorship and control. When Elizabeth Bronfen discusses the dead woman as used by contemporary poets such as Sylvia Plath and Anne Sexton, she says:

Given that the death they invoke carries their own gender, they themselves take on the dual function of referential object and addressee of the poetic utterance. … Plath and Sexton cite conventional conceptions of feminine self so as to recode these radically in such a way that death emerges as an act of self-fashioning. The theme in their poetry is neither the role of the muse nor a repression of death but rather feminine death as the creative resurrection of the represented woman. (401)
Harvey’s repeated confrontation with death can also be regarded as an expression of “autonomous authorship” (Bronfen 401), where playing with the boundaries between life and death presents the artist’s power to control it. For the purpose of this discussion I return to the last two songs in her album Dry. The song Fountain (song 3 appendix 1) serves as a sort of intermediation between life and death, in which the narrator tries to purify herself from her sin: “Stand under the fountain / Cool skin, washed clean / Wash him from me”, but when the wind blows off her clothes she is “…left to take fate into her own hands” (Mazullo 443): “Completely naked / What to do / When everything’s / Left you”. She ultimately drowns herself in Water (song 4 appendix 1): “Leave my clothes on the beach / I’m walking down into the sea”, still very much remembering that a man is responsible for her fate: “Mary Mary what your man said / Washing it all over my head / Mary Mary hold on tightly / Over water / Under the sea”. At the end of Water we cannot be sure if she is dead or alive, if she has drowned and then survived, resurrected. Moreover, “…she continuously remarks that she is ‘walking on water’, suggesting again the character’s androgyny: both Stella Marie and her son share this miracle” (Mazullo 443). On one hand then, the woman here seems to be in control of her fate and sometimes even her gender, as she continuously plays with the act of dying, but on the other, unlike Webster’s speaker, she never forgets the general framework of the story: She is a woman who has whored and therefore must die.

Another controlling element in the dying process in Dry can be extracted by looking at its extensive water symbolism. Harvey plays along the continuum of dry-wet, in which the wet end can be understood as the woman’s attempts to purify herself, be one with nature, or in Freudian terms a return to the womb, anticipating her rebirth. Mazullo argues that “…the woman’s encounter with water at the end of Dry,
may be understood in terms of a rebirth – out of the world of dichotomized gender and into a realm, as yet unrealized, free of such restraints” (433). This is a woman’s struggle to escape altogether the gender problem, achieved through her death. In her article *PJ Harvey’s “Man-Size Sextet” and the Inaccessible, Inescapable Gender*, Judith Peraino argues that “…gender (that is, feminine gender) is inescapable without a willful act of violence…. So that the unfettered, ungendered soul can rise phoenix-like from the ashes” (57). Leaving behind only a trace of the ungendered soul is a wish also expressed by the Victorians. In Mary Elizabeth Coleridge’s poem for example, ‘Some in a child would live, some in a book’, the speaker hopes to leave behind “Less than a word – a little passing look/ Some sign the soul had once, ere she forsook / This form of life to live eternally” (Blain 307). Unlike Harvey, Coleridge does not suggest in this poem that the speaker’s wish necessitates violence in order for it to realize. Gender is not specified in this poem and therefore it is not implied that gender has to be actively ‘killed’. It is possible that Harvey’s cultural setting enables her to convey a more explicit message, while Coleridge’s writing “…can indicate to us the limits of what was acceptable for nicely brought up young women of the period in its frequent suggestion of a layer of painful self suppression” (Blain 285).

Another interesting comparison between Harvey and Coleridge is available, this time through the topic of marriage. In her song *Joy* (song 1 appendix 1), Harvey tells us about Joy, a girl who had a “life un-wed”. It is unclear whether the girl is dead or not, but it is obvious that her life un-wed prescribed her spiritual and emotional death: “No hope for Joy / No hope or faith”. Not marrying, the modern and liberated alternative for women, is presented here not as an independent choice a woman makes but rather as a sort of dark and deathly destiny she faces. In Coleridge’s poem
Marriage, on the other hand, death is the result of marriage. In Marriage, the speaker mourns a maiden’s departure from the free and happy world of maidenhood and her entrance into the suffocating wedlock:

Never shall we see thee, thine eyes glancing,  
Flashing with laughter and wild in glee,  
Under the mistletoe kissing and dancing,  
Wantonly free.

There shall come a matron walking sedately,  
Low-voiced, gentle, wise in reply.  
Tell me, O tell me, can I love her greatly?  
All for her sake must the maiden die! (Blain 294)

Both Harvey’s Joy and Coleridge’s maiden represent the common innocent girl who has been culturally educated to hope for self fulfillment through marriage. Death however, is inescapable for the young girl, no matter which path she takes. As Coleridge implicitly hopes for an alternative for marriage, Harvey ‘replies’ that the alternative path proves deadly just as well. Taken together then, the two works represent the lose-lose situation many women face with regards to marrying. But what does Coleridge mean by “All for her sake must the maiden die!”? Is she simply marking the transition from maidenhood to womanhood, or is she suggesting the more intricate notion that in her death, be it spiritual or physical, she is actually fashioning a new self which is altogether free and divorced from the man’s world?

Having systematically reviewed dead women images in women’s works, this question seems to be relevant to them all. What do they ultimately manage to achieve in their subversive variations on death? If they’re aiming at fashioning a new self, that self is far too vague to grasp. Their accomplishment lies I believe, not in their ability to establish an alternative self, but in their power to deny access to the existing self as an objectified muse. If traditionally, a woman’s death marked the birth of a perfect muse which inspired a work of art by a man, then in the women’s works, this path is
destroyed. In the women’s works, the death of a woman marks the birth of who she
really was as a woman; her story and character narrated, perhaps for the first time, on
her death bed. And the story is usually unpleasant and unclean. What they spit out,
almost spasm-like, is “…a truth (which may or may not be a personal truth) about
dominance, about power and sex relations, and that truth is nauseating” (Reynolds
10).
Works Cited


Appendix 1 – PJ Harvey Song Lyrics

Downloaded from www.pjharvey.net

1) Joy

Joy was her name
A life un-wed
Thirty years old
Never danced a step
She would have left these red hills far behind if not for her condition
'Would have left these red hills long ago if not for my condition'

Pitiful Joy

She looked away
Into a hollow sky
Came face to face
With her own innocence surrounding her until it never was a question
Innocence so suffocating, now she cannot move, no question
No hope for Joy
No hope or faith
She wanted to go blind
Wanted hope to stay
'I've been believing in nothing since I was born, it never was a question.'

2) Plants and Rags

Plants and rags
Ease myself into a body- bag

Dreamt a man
He fed me fine food, he gave me shiny things

White and black
Are you looking for the sun boy?
The sun doesn't shine down here, no, in shadow

House and home
Who thought they could take away that place?
Lead us outside, and lead us out quietly

3) Fountain

Stand
Under
Fountain
Cool skin
Wash clean
Wash him
From me

Along comes wind
A big bone-shaker
Blows off my clothes
Completely naked
What to do
When everything
Has left you?

Out of the blue
It is he
A vision to me
Bearing leaves
Petals green
Covers me
In all my shame

Hand in hand
He's my big man
Stays with me
Some forty days
No words
Then goes away
I cry
Again

4) Water

Water
Walking on
Water

For years
Taking it into my head
Living by the right lines
Reading what the very man said

Water
Walking on
Water

Neighing on eleven years
Taking it into my head
Mary Mary drop me softly
I've been reading what your very man said
Neighing on eleven years
Taking it into my head
Leave my clothes on the beach
I'm walking down into the sea

Prove it to me

Now the water to my ankles
Now the water to my knees
Think of him all waxy wings
Melted down into the sea
Mary Mary what your man said
Is washing in all over my head
Mary Mary hold on tightly
Over water under the sea

5) Down by the water

lost my heart
Under the bridge
To that little girl
So much to me
And now I moan
And now I holler
She'll never know
Just what I found
That blue eyed girl
{That blue eyed girl}
She said "no more"
{She said "no more"}
That blue eyed girl
{That blue eyed girl}
Became blue eyed whore
{Big blue eyed whore}
Down by the water
{Down by the water}
I took her hand
{I took her hand}
Just like my daughter
{Just like my daughter}
See her again
{See her again}

Oh help me Jesus
Come through this storm
I had to lose her
I do her harm
I heard her holler
{I heard her holler}
I heard her moan
{I heard her moan}
My lovely daughter
{My lovely daughter}
I took her home
{I took her home}

Little fish. big fish. swimming in the water.
Come back here, man. gimme my daughter.
Little fish. big fish. swimming in the water.
Come back here, man. gimme my daughter.
Little fish. big fish. swimming in the water.
Come back here, man. gimme my daughter.
Little fish. big fish. swimming in the water.
Come back here, man. gimme my daughter.
Little fish. big fish. swimming in the water.
Come back here, man. gimme my daughter.
Little fish. big fish. swimming in the water.
Come back here, man. gimme my daughter.
Little fish. big fish. swimming in the water.
Come back here, man. gimme my daughter.
Appendix 2 – A selection of PJ Harvey Album Covers

Downloaded from www.pjharvey.net

1) 4 Track Demos
2) Dry
3) 50 Foot Queenie (Single)
4) Rid of Me
5) This is Love (single)  
6) To Bring You My Love  
7) A Perfect Day Elise (Single)