

**A CRY OF (LITTLE) DEATH:
A POLYPHONIC ACCOUNT OF MYSTICISM, SEX AND SELF-DISSOLUTION**

Vera Brozzoni - PhD in Music

**Newcastle University - ICMuS
June 2015**

ABSTRACT

Sexual and mystical ecstasy can be linked to experiences of loss of self; they are thus instruments for an individual to reach a higher dimension through a process that encompasses body and mind. These ideas can also be expressed through music; *Theogyny*, the composition accompanying this writing, is an *a cappella* polyphonic piece delivered entirely by my voice to express a woman's dissolving identity during a mystical sexual experience. I contend that a female voice sonically extended to the extremities of its range is the most appropriate instrument to reflect this.

First of all I formulate a "theogonic hypothesis" that posits how the idea of God was born in mankind following its experience of sexual ecstasy, not of natural phenomena as commonly believed. I then examine the experience of loss of self and how it can lead to the union with God, mainly focusing on three instances: dismemberment, mystical ecstasy, sexual jouissance. I illustrate how the dissolved self can reach the divine dimension and will explain why mystical experiences necessarily need to come to an end.

After these points are established, I explain why human voice is the best instrument to express jouissance, especially when expressed not in the melody but in the cry. I describe how human voice was traditionally both used to pray God and feared as a demonic power, then I concentrate on women's voices and genderless, pansexual voices.

In the third part I focus on my own work: after an overview of my musical aesthetics and career, I prove how the philosophical and musicological ideas expressed so far can be found in my music and will give an in-depth look at some of my most notable compositions; finally I describe the compositional and performance process of *Theogyny*. Just like *Theogyny* itself, this dissertation presents itself as a *gradus*, a progress towards a cathartic end.

To my parents, for their constant, unflinching support.

To A. M., who holds on to me as I gaze into the abyss.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction	p. 1
Chapter 1 - An Alternative Theogony	p. 5
Chapter 2 - Loss(es) Of Self	
2.1 Ecstasy	p. 11
2.2 Dismemberment	p. 16
2.3 Sexual Jouissance	p. 21
Chapter 3 - The Eternal Return Of Discontinuity	p. 25
Chapter 4 - Voice And Jouissance	p. 31
Chapter 5 - Words And Voices	
5.1 Word Of God Versus Cry Of Ecstasy	p. 36
5.2 Voice And Woman	p. 40
5.3 From Female Voices To Genderless Voices	p. 45
Chapter 6 - A Cry Of (Little) Death: <i>Theogyny</i>	
6.1 My Progress As A Musician	p. 49
6.2 My Philosophy, My Music	p. 52
6.3 Notable Compositions: The Progress Towards <i>Theogyny</i>	p. 56
6.4 The Composition Of <i>Theogyny</i>	p. 61
6.5 The Performance Of <i>Theogyny</i>	p. 65
Conclusion	p. 68
Appendix - Musical Evidence Overview	p. 71
Bibliography	p. 76

INTRODUCTION

“The author of this book has himself insisted upon the gravity of what he has to say. Nonetheless, it would seem advisable to underscore the seriousness of it, if only because of the widespread custom of making light of those writings that deal with the subject of sexual life”¹

“To say the least, music is no laughing matter”²

“Jeder Engel ist schrecklich”³

It is not easy to write about sex, nor it is to draw comparisons between sex and mystical experience. Both subjects almost unfailingly elicit muffled laughter or embarrassed looks, as does the idea of a piece of music that is meant to depict a faithful image of them and their relationship. Music and sex, music about sex: this over-inflated, over-marketed combination never fails to attract the most superficial and uneducated kind of attention. But the work submitted here, as well as the works of those who inspired it, asks to be approached with patience and trust: the same trust I had to discover in myself, by means of a long psychological training, in order to assume the weight of the ideas that others before me have so beautifully crafted (in their minds and in their lives) and that I gathered as an *offrande* to those who will know how to accept them. As Lucretius in his poem *On The Nature Of Things* chose to express “bitter” scientific content by smearing it with the “honey” of poetry⁴, so I am going to present these ideas not only in writing, but also in singing.

¹ Georges Bataille, Preface to *Madame Edwarda*, in *My Mother, Madame Edwarda And The Dead Man* trans. Austryn Wainhouse (London: Marion Boyars, 1989), p. 137.

² Mladen Dolar, *A Voice And Nothing More* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press 2006), p. 44.

³ “Every angel is terrifying”. Rainer Maria Rilke, *Second Duino Elegy*.

⁴ “For as physicians, when they seek to give
Young boys the nauseous wormwood, first do touch
The brim around the cup with the sweet juice
And yellow of the honey, [...]
So now I too [...] have desired
To expound our doctrine unto thee in song
Soft-speaking and Pierian, and, as 'twere
To touch it with sweet honey of the Muse.”

Titus Lucretius Carus, *On The Nature Of Things*, transl. William Ellery Leonard, book IV, vv. 11-24. In http://classics.mit.edu/Carus/nature_things.4.iv.html.

Theogyny, the major musical composition accompanying this dissertation, is a multi-channel, *a cappella* polyphonic piece delivered entirely by my voice; in it I wish to express the multi-faceted yet unitary condition of human identity in the frame of a superhuman experience. In it I make use of various extended vocal techniques that allow me to produce a wide range of sounds and pitches, in order to communicate a more complex meaning. Moreover, each vocal line features looped wordless sounds abstract noises and melodic elements. The composition follows a metaphorical “narrative” and a cyclical line: the vocal channels start off quietly then develop in waves, forming a crescendo of volume and pitch until they reach an apex – after which, all the channels suddenly fall back to the state of quiet they had started off from, ready to begin the same progression again. It will soon be clear that the choice of this structure is not merely aesthetic, but is necessarily related to the subject: I will seek to demonstrate, after Michel Poizat’s findings in his book *The Angel’s Cry – Beyond The Pleasure Principle In Opera*, that it is most appropriate to talk about sex and mysticism through a human voice sonically extended to touch upon the territories of the angelic and the demonic, terms to be understood here as archetypes⁵.

This musical experience and the philosophical position that informs it entail a loss of self (not to be confused with loss of consciousness, as I will explain later) without which the mystical dimension⁶ cannot be attained. Georges Bataille’s seminal essay *Eroticism* has offered me an articulated philosophical entry point through which to understand this idea of loss of self as the innermost, deepest and at the same time highest experience of sexuality, that which holds the strongest relationship with the spiritual sphere. *Eroticism*, alongside other works by the same author such as *Madame Edwarda*, *Visions Of Excess*, *The Solar Anus* and his indispensable commentary *On Nietzsche* will punctuate the written part of this submission and informs the meaning and process of its correlated musical reflection, *Theogyny*.

⁵ I am aware that different cultures link music and mysticism in a totally different way, for example Arctic Shamanism makes use of drums and pipes to induce trance states in the shaman. This ethnomusicological strand of my research, albeit very fascinating, in the end turned out to be not completely pertinent to the main points of this dissertation and therefore had to be abandoned.

⁶ Because of my Italian origins and consequent cultural influence, I will have to focus my examination on Christian mysticism and won’t foray into other religions such as Islam or Buddhism. Although a comparative study about mysticism in Christianity and other religions could be of great interest, at the moment my understanding of those creeds is not deep enough for me to investigate them properly.

Jacques Lacan's theories of *jouissance* and the *objet petit "a"* will serve as a psychoanalytical fundament to Bataille's and other philosophers' thought. Nietzsche's *The Birth Of Tragedy* and Karoly Kerényi's study *Dionysos – Archetypal Image Of Indestructible Life* will provide a mythological background for some of the themes investigated in these pages, both in a philosophical and a musicological sense. Dionysos is a mythological figure that is subject to extremes of physical experience and in whose myth the motif of physical pain and high spiritual achievement are combined; Dionysos is dismembered only so as to be reborn⁷. My examination of Dionysian rituals as described by the above writers will comprise of some gruesome details about dismemberment and sacrifice; while this might sound excessive to some readers, I am convinced that it adds strength to my arguments and is perfectly in line with the themes of my music. After all we must not forget that, in Frank W. Stevenson's words, "Bataille values modern poetic language, along with ritual sacrifice and eroticism, because it is an explosive force which exhausts or 'sacrifices' itself and thus can lead or point us towards 'the sacred'."⁸ Finally, Nietzsche's concept of the Eternal Return will inform my musical work and the reason why it has to be performed repeatedly in a circular movement. Together with these contemporary philosophers, I will often refer to ancient Greek and Latin culture, both as an homage to my cultural and geographic roots and as a recognition of their piercing anthropological insight – a legacy that still lives on.

This dissertation is divided into three main parts: first I will give an account of the philosophical framework that has led me to identify the themes informing *Theogyny*; then I will describe the musicological theories I have based the composition of *Theogyny* on; after this I will recount my progress as a musician and how I reached the ability to compose this work, my most complex to date, and to devise the settings in which it should be properly performed.

In Chapter 1 I formulate a "theogonic hypothesis" that posits the birth of the idea of God in mankind following its experience of sexual ecstasy, as opposed to the

⁷ It is interesting to note how the theme of a suffering God can be found in other religions: the crucifixion of Jesus as a man and his subsequent resurrection in a divine form spring to mind. But also Odin's ordeal, hanging himself upside down for nine days and nights from the branches of Yggdrasil while suffering from a self-inflicted wound in order to die, be reborn and see through the secret of the Runes.

⁸ Frank W. Stevenson, "Inverted Surfaces: Bataille's 'Pineal Eye' And The Mythopoeitics Of Augury", in *Concentric: Studies In English Literature And Linguistics*, 29.1 (January 2003), p. 67.

common belief according to which the idea of God was born following mankind's experience of wonderful and scary natural phenomena. This serves as a postulate for all the next chapters. In Chapter 2 I investigate the meaning of the expression "loss of self" and how that state can be reached and felt, and how it can lead to the union with God. I mainly focus on three (among others) extremely intense experiences that lead the self towards its dissolution: 1) Dismemberment 2) Mystical Ecstasy 3) Sexual Jouissance⁹. In Chapter 3 I illustrate how the dissolved self can reach the divine dimension and its state of continuity with the totality of Being; I also explain why mystical experience necessarily needs to come to an end, and how this end is a prelude to a new beginning: this cyclical movement restores its power and ensures that its vital core is never fully spent.

After these main philosophical points are established, I introduce the theme of voice and vocality. In Chapter 4 I explain how and why human voice is the best instrument to express jouissance especially when it reaches its expressive apex not in the melody (*mélòs*, the "singing"¹⁰) but in the cry. In Chapter 5 I describe how human voice was traditionally both used to pray God and feared as a demonic power. In the following sections of this chapter I concentrate respectively on women's voices and genderless, pansexual voices.

The third part is centred on my own work: Chapter 6 starts with an overview of my musical aesthetics and career, then goes on to prove how the philosophical and musicological ideas expressed so far can be found in my own music; I take an in-depth look at some of my most notable compositions that contain *in nuce* the same principles of my final piece, and finally I thoroughly describe the compositional and performance process of *Theogyny*. Just like *Theogyny* itself, this dissertation presents itself as a *gradus*, a progress towards a cathartic end.

⁹ I will use this term instead of the common word "orgasm" as the feeling I am referring is not simply that of physical pleasure but is akin to mind-body ecstatic connection.

¹⁰ <http://stephanus.tlg.uci.edu/ljsj/#eid=68352&context=ljsj&action=from-search>

CHAPTER 1

AN ALTERNATIVE THEOGONY

On February 22nd, 2012, I attended *Configuring Catastrophe*, a public talk by historian Jay Winter held at the White Cube Gallery (London) within the Anselm Kiefer¹¹ exhibition *Il Mistero Delle Cattedrali*¹². Winter explained how several of Kiefer's monumental works of art are composed of rough material that is left to decay in the open, and how the explicit chemical transformations appearing on their surfaces can be understood to symbolise both alchemical transformation and the metamorphosis of myth into history and back. By drawing from a mythical symbolism in order to carry a message about history these works of art become "signifiers" of myth themselves, they evoke and generate a totally different mythology of its own, newly loaded with historical meaning. The idea that mythology was not simply a relic of the past but could be reinvented even today, and that mythology was born out of the artistic gesture, out of *making a work of art*, struck me as very fascinating. Soon after that, I started to work on a song called "In The Dark Synapses"¹³ (that I will analyse in depth at a later stage in this dissertation) whose main theme is a comparison between the inception/development of thoughts in the brain and the sexual conception/growth of a foetus in the mother's womb; the inspiration for that had come to me after attending the exhibition *Brains: The Mind as Matter*¹⁴ at the Wellcome Collection (London), featuring specimens of real human brains. Following these two trains of thought (mythology and the brain) I started to think that it would be possible, and interesting indeed, to create a mythology of my own and to express it by means of art – of music in my case. I will now trace the progress that led me to invent the "alternative theogony" that inspired and informed my musical practice, in particular my final PhD composition *Theogyny*.

Among the domain of mythology, theogony seems to me the heaviest and most complex of thoughts, because it calls upon the Highest Being and the very creation of primeval universe and life. The atheist thinker understands very well that, by

¹¹ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Anselm_Kiefer.

¹² http://whitecube.com/exhibitions/anselm_kiefer_il_mistero_delle_cattedrali_bermondsey_2011/.

¹³ <https://soundcloud.com/verabremerton/in-the-dark-synapses-revisited>.

¹⁴ <http://www.wellcomecollection.org/press/press-releases/brains-the-mind-as-matter.aspx>.

inventing a theogony, mankind is actually creating its own creator, thus debasing itself to the inferior, passive rank of “creature”. So what experience can be so devastating, so shocking to impregnate mankind’s collective mind with the extremely humbling idea of being the living work of an external creator? Going back to the philosophical tradition I had examined during my studies in Italy, I concluded that the first thinker to rationally respond to this enquiry was Latin poet-cum-philosopher Titus Lucretius Carus. Lucretius, whose work and thought I have already investigated in my BA dissertation¹⁵ as well as his influence on the histories of religion and of atheism throughout modern philosophy, was not an atheist himself; he did believe, after his master Epicurus, that deities lived in the “intermundia”, a dimension located in the highest skies. However, he was extremely critical of the social and political use made of religion by the clergy of his time¹⁶. By doing so, he problematically embodied the chasm between a religious and a materialistic *Weltanschauung*, still keeping the latter drenched with myth¹⁷. In book V of his philosophical and encyclopaedic poem *On The Nature Of Things (De Rerum Natura)*, Lucretius attributes the idea of God to something discovered (or invented) in response to the fear and awe experienced by primitive peoples when witnessing frightening natural phenomena, such as earthquakes, storms, volcanic eruptions, etc¹⁸. These phenomena

¹⁵ *The Empty Sky: A Critical Comparison Between Lucretius And Nietzsche* (Milan: Università degli Studi di Milano, 2003).

¹⁶ See his heartfelt account of Iphigenia’s sacrifice in *De Rerum Natura*, Book I, concluding with the famous formula “*tantum Religio potuit suadere malorum!*” (“to such evils religion could lead!”, my translation).

¹⁷ To know more on how Lucretius’ Epicurean and materialist philosophy was to have a profound impact on the emergence of scientific rationalism in the post-Renaissance period, see Stephen Greenblatt, *The Swerve – How the World Became Modern* (New York, NY: W. W. Norton & Co., 2012).

¹⁸ “Then, too, they kept observing what went on
 In the sky in fixed order — various seasons
 Of the year returning — and could not see
 The causes that made these happen. Therefore,
 They found themselves a way out, by linking
 All these to the gods, making everything
 Directed by gods’ will. And they set up
 Habitations and spaces for the gods
 Up in the sky, for they saw night and moon
 Moving through the heavens — moon, day, and night,
 Glorious nocturnal constellations,
 Celestial torches wandering at night,
 Flying fires, clouds, sun, rain, snow, and wind,
 Lighting, hail, swift peals and ominous sounds
 Of menacing thunder.”

are what in ancient Greek is called *thaumastòs*, literally “that which is wonderful”. In his dialogue *Theaetetus*, Plato (through the voice of Socrates) states that the *thaumastòs* indicates the very first source of curiosity and eagerness for knowledge in mankind¹⁹ – therefore, the source of philosophy, for mythology and of course for theogony. It can be concluded that the birth of the idea of a creator God happens in mankind out of fear of an impending catastrophe coming from the outer world; mankind places itself at the mercy of a God who comes from without and threatens it with fearsome spectacles.

At this point of my thought I tried to reverse all the terms of the conclusion illustrated above and to discover whether mankind could have conceived the idea of God following a completely different path: What if theogony didn't necessarily require mankind's debasement? What if mankind, and not God, could be placed at the top of the hierarchy? What if mankind could have experienced the theogonic *thaumastòs* as coming from a completely different source – from within rather than from without, from an internal phenomenon rather than an external one? This would indicate and prove mankind's power to create the idea of the divine, and therefore to “meet” with it, to face it as a *fait accompli*, thanks uniquely to forces found within him/herself. But could mankind actually go through such a strong and powerful internal process as to generate the thought “I am my own God, I own a spark of divinity, I have the power of creation within me”, and what could trigger this process? It seems to me that this thought must have stemmed from an extremely intense manifestation of ecstatic energy, the most absolute realisation and actualisation of mankind's life potential, an experience that can lead it to create the most absolute idea: that of the Highest Being. Here I went back to “In The Dark Synapses” and followed the same intuition that that had led me to write that song (that is, the comparison between mental inception and sexual conception): this experience must have a sexual root, therefore the thought of the Highest Being must necessarily come from the Highest Sexual Experience: I personally identify this with that slippery, ambivalent, shadowy experience called *jouissance*, because of the extreme physical, spiritual and mental aspects of it. In summary my proposition,

Titus Lucretius Carus, *On The Nature Of Things*, trans. Ian Johnston. (Arlington, VA: Richer Resources Publications, 2010), vv. 1660-1674.

¹⁹ See in detail David W. Bollert, “The Wonder Of Humanity In Plato's Dialogues”, in *Kritiké* 4.1, June 2010, pp. 174-198.

which also underlies the creative work submitted here, is that mankind created God as it *experienced* God through sexual jouissance; mankind invented God through sex²⁰.

It is now necessary to spend a few words on jouissance, on why it is such a difficult concept to grasp and to communicate, and what its effects are on the jouissant subject. In her paper *Beyond The Jouissance Principle*, feminist writer Jane Gallop borrows a fitting definition of jouissance from Roland Barthes' *Pleasure of the Text* as she argues that the supposed impossibility to translate the word "jouissance" lies in its own elusiveness, verging on inexplicability: "Briefly, Barthes distinguishes between *plaisir*, which is comfortable, ego-assuring, recognized and legitimated as culture, and 'jouissance', which is shocking, ego-disruptive, and in conflict with the canons of culture"²¹. And again, from a feminist cultural perspective, Gallop adds: "The editors of *New French Feminism* state²², in a footnote, that '(jouissance) is a word used by Hélène Cixous to refer to that intense, rapturous pleasure which women know and men fear'. Here the two are conjoined but divorced: *we* have jouissance, *they* fear it. If jouissance is defined, as it is by Barthes and the women, as a loss of self, disruption of comfort, loss of control, it cannot simply be claimed as an ego-gratifying identity, but must also frighten those who 'know' it"²³. So jouissance seems linked with fear, with a sacred terror, which makes it similar to Kant's descriptions of one specific kind of sublime: "The feeling of (the sublime) is sometimes accompanied by some dread or even melancholy (...) I will call the first the terrifying sublime"²⁴. Also, in Michel Poizat's words jouissance entails the not necessarily pleasant feeling of "sensory upset and emotional turmoil"²⁵ and is completely gratuitous, in that it is not immediately exploitable as a positive feeling: Poizat here quotes Jacques Lacan and his resolute formula "jouissance is that which

²⁰ This shouldn't be surprising, since sex is a creative force par excellence. Aside from material life procreation, sex also works as the bearer of new creations at an ecstatic experiential level.

²¹ Jane Gallop, "Beyond the Jouissance Principle" in *Representations*, No. 7, Summer 1984 (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press), p. 111.

²² The author here refers to Elaine Marks and Isabelle de Courtivron, eds. *New French Feminisms: An Anthology* (Amherst, MA: Schocken Books, 1980).

²³ Jane Gallop, "Beyond the Jouissance Principle" in *Representations*, No. 7, Summer 1984 (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press), p. 114.

²⁴ Immanuel Kant, *Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and Sublime and other Writings*, transl. Patrick Frierson and Paul Guyer, 2011 (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press), p. 16.

²⁵ Michel Poizat, *The Angel's Cry. Beyond the Pleasure Principle in Opera*, transl. Arthur Denner (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1992), p. 6.

is useless”²⁶. Of course the French psychoanalyst’s theories about *jouissance* are much more profound and complex – too much so to be examined in depth here; it seems safe, though, to say that in his view *jouissance* is inextricably linked to dissatisfaction, to a craving for an unspecifiable, ever-fleeting “more”²⁷ that is destined to remain unfulfilled. “Lacan spoke of a persistent yearning for total satisfaction ‘in the real’ that he termed *jouissance* (...) (it) is the retroactive effect of becoming a separate subject, which leaves a permanent ache of desire in its wake”²⁸.

However, it would be a mistake to identify *jouissance* purely with a negative feeling, first of all because if that was the case, there would be no reason for humanity to bother seeking it; but also because accepting this idea would leave the hierarchical submission of a scared mankind under a scary God unchanged and unchallenged. What makes the concept of *jouissance* so hard to define, and what informs my alternative theogony, is its intrinsic complexity, its irreducible coexistence of pleasure and terror; the temporary suspension of ordinary embodiment commonly linked to the orgasmic “little death” involves a loss of self/identity/control that is *fascinans et tremenda* (beguiling and scary). But it also involves a sense of awe and of *thaumastòs* that is easily comparable to religious ecstasy; as philosopher and psychoanalyst Julia Kristeva testifies, talking about her patient Marianne, “It is when she doesn’t find a word for *jouissance* with partners who humiliate her or hurt her, but which she is the first to ask for (...) that Marianne uses the word *God* (...) it is the *jouissance* of sacrifice, desired and submitted to, that she calls *God*”²⁹. Both the positive and negative sides of *jouissance* are clearly exposed in Marianne’s case, and it seems to me that she has fully embraced the active creation of a God that spurts out of her pleasure and desire, not simply of her defilement. In brief, to hand oneself over to *jouissance* means to walk on a tight rope suspended between *cupio dissolvi* and

²⁶ Jacques Lacan, *Le Séminaire, Livre XX: Encore* (Paris: Seuil, 1975), p. 10.

²⁷ This “more” would be what Lacan names *Objet petit “a”*: the unattainable focus around which desire incessantly circles.

²⁸ Lewis A. Kirshner, “Rethinking Desire: The *Objet Petit “A”* In Lacanian Theory” in *Journal Of The American Psychoanalytical Association* 53, 2005, p. 85. Also available at <http://apa.sagepub.com/content/53/1/83>.

On the theme of “becoming a separate subject”, see following chapters about Georges Bataille’s idea of discontinuity and continuity.

²⁹ Catherine Clément, Julia Kristeva, *The Feminine and the Sacred*, transl. Jane Marie Todd (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2001), p. 45, in Milo Sweedler, *The Dismembered Community: Bataille, Blanchot, Leiris and the Remains of Laure*, (Newark, DE: University of Delaware Press, 2009), p. 45.

horror vacui and to keep a fragile balance while constantly, imperceptibly swinging from one side to the other.

As blasphemous as it sounds, my hypothesis is actually not such a long departure from tradition: I am still positing that God is a cultural reaction created by mankind when it goes *beyond* itself, *out of* itself, when it enters an altered state of extreme emotion, albeit in a different way. Of course this position does not appear in any instance of the official history of philosophy or religion, nor it aspires to be included in future textbooks; however, it is a precious ground for my creative practice. In this regard it must be noted that according to Jonathan David York, “Mythopoeic thinking comes closest to capturing the pre-logical speech of (the theopathic) lost mode of sacred experience [...] Myth is ‘true’ because it is *an experience*”³⁰. Therefore from my subjective point of view, thinking as a composer, this theogony becomes true as much as it allows me to compose, as much as it underlies the creative work presented in this PhD. In fact *jouissance*, pleasure, awe and fear are the sentiments that have inspired my final piece *Theogyny* and those it wants to evoke in the listener, as I will profusely examine at a later stage in this dissertation. For now, suffice to say that since *Theogyny* exists, the alternative theogony that informs it may as well have its own “truth” to stand on.

³⁰ Jonathan David York, “Flesh And Consciousness: Georges Bataille And The Dionysian”, p. 56, in *Journal for Cultural and Religious Theory* 4.3, August 2003.

CHAPTER 2

LOSS(ES) OF SELF

2.1 ECSTASY

Three of the most common situations where loss of self is experienced are relevant to my PhD submission: mystical ecstasy, extreme physical pain (dismemberment in particular) and sexual jouissance. Although these three categories often intertwine, supersede and turn into one another, I will examine them separately, because there are productive conclusions to be drawn from each of them that will become significant later on in the course of this dissertation.

The encounter with the divine (whatever theogonic origin the godhead is accorded by the man or woman mystic who encounters it) through spiritual transcendence entails the dissolution, or loss, of the subjective self – in other words, it demands and promotes an extension of subjectivity that exceeds the boundaries of the “normal” self mankind experiences in day to day life; this extension can be likened to the one that follows deep meditation or near-death experiences. It is notable that when the expression “loss of self” is mentioned, the first meaning that springs to mind is madness: an extreme and violent relinquishment of what is deemed human, balanced, sane. This is a “self” that is completely “human”, where “human” is equated with “reason”: the psychopath who loses his/her reason, who loses him/her-self is often perceived by the human social community as a wild animal, or a devil, as someone who gets too closely in touch with what is *pre-human* or *beyond* human and thus must be placed beyond such community³¹. His/her self is lost to it. The rational, reasoning and reasonable self is not “there” anymore; the loss is perceived as negative because it manifests a lack. However, I would like to propose that there is a more positive and more “creative” meaning to the idea of loss of self – that losing one’s self does not necessarily create a lack but an opportunity for a different state of being to manifest itself. I will focus on this meaning, which finds its validity on the positive value I will give to the idea of *loss*.

³¹ Hence the necessary aloneness of the Overman, see various loci in Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, transl. R. J. Hollingdale (London: Penguin 1961) and *The Will To Power*, transl. Walter Kaufmann and R. J. Hollingdale, ed. W. Kaufmann (New York, NY: Vintage, 1968).

In fact loosening the ropes of subjectivity, demolishing the rational ramparts of everyday experience, opening oneself to a higher, super-subjective dimension can give way to the most intense sense and experience of pure being. Even G. W. F. Hegel, one of the most rigid and systematic thinkers in history, seems to acknowledge this when he explains, “Spirit attains its truth only by finding itself in absolute *dismemberment*³², It does not attain that (prodigious) power by being the Positive that turns away from the Negative [...] no, Spirit is that power only in the degree to which it contemplates the Negative face to face [and] dwells with it”³³. In other, still Hegelian words, Spirit is a *Synthesis* continuously created and nurtured by the dynamic, dialectic relationship between *Thesis* (the Positive) and *Antithesis* (the Negative). It is the constant, neverending, conflictual chasm between these two opposites that makes Spirit capable of *being* – like an unstable chemical compound. Similarly, when reporting Georges Bataille’s thought, J. D. York states, “When we submit to the self-loss of inner experience we encounter being in its purest, which is to say basest condition”³⁴. When we “lose” ourselves and descend into a primordial state, occasionally losing the ability to move or to speak in a coherent way (as the chronicles of many mystics testify – see further chapters), the loss is only apparent: what we are experiencing is actually more the resurgence of a different state of self. This new self born out of ecstasy (be it mystical or sexual), this self that seems “lost” but is actually simply displaced, removed from its usual dimension in order to reveal its innermost state, occurs neither as the fruit of mere escapism nor as an accident that befalls the subject, but as a “behaviour” that one consciously chooses to (figuratively) drown his/herself in, a temporary rejection of the *principium individuationis*³⁵ that allows (and is allowed by) the subject’s willful dive into the realm of what can be called *the sacred*: a virtual and immaterial space, an inner “temple”³⁶ where one can retreat, relinquish and dissolve everyday subjectivity and devote him/herself to the

³² My italics. As the reader will see, dismemberment is one of the key concepts I am going to examine from a mythical and philosophical perspective.

³³ Quoted from G. W. F. Hegel, *Phenomenology Of Spirit* in Stevenson 2003, p. 71.

³⁴ York 2003, p. 53.

³⁵ We could even say that this loss of self presupposes and is akin to Martin Heidegger’s idea of disillusioned existential awareness that he calls Being-towards-death (Sein-zum-Tode). See M. Heidegger, *Being And Time*, transl. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson. (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1962). For an agile introduction to Heidegger’s terminology, see Diane Zorn, *Heidegger’s Philosophy Of Death*, in http://www.yorku.ca/zorn/files/Phil_of_death.pdf.

³⁶ As I explain in Chapter 6.5, my musical work *Theogyny* aims at creating an analogous space - both in a physical and a spiritual sense. See also note 220, p. 66.

encounter with God. In feminist musicologist Catherine Clément's words, "The sacred authorizes the lapse, the disappearance of the Subject, the syncope, vertigo, the trance, ecstasy, the 'above-the-roof' so blue"³⁷. In my view, not only the sacred "authorizes" all this, but demands and enforces it too.

Etymologically, the word "ecstasy" comes from the Greek *ék-stasis*, literally meaning *being out* (we could add – out of one's mind, of one's self); its common meanings include "displacement, movement outwards, distraction of mind, entrancement"³⁸. However, so far I have theorised that God resides as a potential inside mankind. This poses a linguistic and conceptual contradiction: how come one needs to go *outside* of him/herself in order to find something that is actually *inside* of them? It is undeniable that there is a convergence between ecstasy and introspection, and often mystics have described how they are totally oblivious of the outer world, and completely absorbed into their own inner world, when they find themselves in the throes of ecstasy³⁹. Jacques Lacan solves this apparent paradox by bringing in the idea of *extimacy* (one of his frequent *hapax legomena*, coined after "exterior" and "intimacy"): this state indicates a liminal experience by which interior and exterior collide in a non-distinct oneness with the totality of everything. "Extimacy indicates the non-distinction and essential identity between the dual terms of the outside and the deepest inside, the exterior and the most interior of the psyche, the outer world and the inner world of the subject, culture and the core of personality, the social and the mental, surface and depth, behaviour and thoughts or feelings"⁴⁰. In extimacy the borders between in and out, self and other, simply vanish as artefacts put forward by the ego in order to defend its own uniqueness from otherness. This is the kind of ecstasy that allows the subject to go *out, internally* to reach for its own divinity, and that allows that same divinity to surge out in a continuous dialectical in/out movement similar to that of a convective current in a torus shape⁴¹. If we examine

³⁷ Catherine Clément in C. Clément, J. Kristeva, *The Feminine and the Sacred*, transl. Jane Marie Todd (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2001), p. 45.

³⁸ See H. G. Liddell, R. Scott, H. S. Jones, *A Greek-English Lexicon*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), now on line at <http://stephanus.tlg.uci.edu/lsg/#eid=33922&context=lsj&action=from-search>.

³⁹ See for example various loci in Teresa Of Avila, *The Interior Castle Or The Mansions*, transl. The Benedictines of Stanbrook (Grand Rapids, MI: Christian Classics Ethereal Library, 1921 reprint).

⁴⁰ David Pavón-Cuellar, "Extimacy" in Thomas Teo (ed.), *Encyclopedia Of Critical Psychology* (New York, NY: Springer, 2014), p. 1.

⁴¹ The torus is one of the geometric shapes that Lacan examines in his study of topology.

jouissance and the states that cause it (which I will describe later) under the lens of extimacy, it is easier to understand how during these experiences the boundaries of self are suspended: “The extimate, like the intimate, is that which is the most hidden. (...) Extimacy concerns, in effect, the cause of jouissance.”⁴² In other words during jouissance, during an individual’s extremely private communion with God, that individual’s self *must* be lost in order for the communion to even happen. Is renouncing one’s self the extreme sacrifice that God demands of the mortal soul who dares to connect directly with it? Possibly, if we still retain the traditional hierarchy that sees God dominating over mankind. But from the philosophical standpoint I have already started to illustrate, I am more inclined to turn this “renounce” into Mankind’s ability and conscious choice of breaking its own self-imposed boundaries in order to reach its own self-created godhead.

Of course this operation of loss of self is not easy or immediate or without risks. It is actually a terrifying perspective, as the resulting state is so heightened that even the boundaries between life and death begin to blur. But what do we really mean by *death* in this context? In a poetic and powerful way, while discussing the similarities between erotic and spiritual ecstasy, Georges Bataille explains, “No one has in mind a death that is merely absence of life [...] To live for the moment, no longer to heed these instincts for survival; that is dying to oneself, or at least it is living with *death as an equal*”⁴³. In the French essayist’s philosophy, any state of ecstasy is seen as a mixture of extreme life and near death, the two extremes that tear the individual out of the fabric of everyday life⁴⁴. In fact, “For Bataille, a debauched sexuality [...] was at the heart of mystical experience [...] he stated that ‘in sadism we begin by suppressing the object, while in mysticism it is necessary to *suppress the subject*’.”⁴⁵. Not surprisingly, Bataille’s choice of words seem to echo the experiences of two of the foremost Christian mystics, John of the Cross and Teresa of Avila, both establishing self-dissolution as one of the key points of their transcendental

⁴² Pierre-Gilles Guéguen, “The Intimate, the extimate, and Psychoanalytic discourse” in *Jacques Lacan and the other side of Psychoanalysis*, J. Clemens, R. Griggs eds., (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006), p. 270.

⁴³ Georges Bataille, *Eroticism*, transl. Mary Dalwood. (London: Marion Boyars, 1962), p. 233. My italics.

⁴⁴ Needless to say, In this light it is evident why in common language people usually refer to sexual orgasm as the “little death”.

⁴⁵ Georges Bataille, *The Absence of Myth*, 60. In Roberta Mock, “Visions Of Xs” in Karoline Gritzner (ed.), *Eroticism And Death In Theatre And Performance* (Hatfield: University Of Hertfordshire Press, 2010), p. 181. My italics.

experiences: the former explains that “This spiritual running after God [is] a going forth *out of oneself*, by forgetting self, which is brought about by the love of God. For when the love of God touches the soul with that vividness of which we are here speaking, it so elevates it, that it goes forth only out of itself by *self-forgetfulness*”⁴⁶; whereas according to the latter, “In the prayer of union the soul is asleep [...] it is deprived of all feeling whatever, being unable to think on any subject, even if it wished. [...]. In fact, it has died entirely to this world, to live more truly than ever in God. This is a delicious death, for the soul is deprived of the faculties it exercised while in the body”⁴⁷.

⁴⁶ John of the Cross, *A Spiritual Canticle Of The Soul And The Bridegroom Christ*, transl. David Lewis (London: Thomas Baker 1909), now at http://archive.org/stream/spiritualcanticl09john/spiritualcanticl09john_djvu.txt.

⁴⁷ Teresa of Avila 1921, p. 75.

2. 2 DISMEMBERMENT

“The Titans took the Divine Child Dionysos by surprise, killed him, and prepared to eat him. In the generally known version of the story, the child was slain by being torn to pieces. This was the *spáragmos*, the ecstatic action known to us from Crete”⁴⁸. This is the core of the myth of Dionysus Zagreus, who needs to undergo the torment of dismemberment and to be put together again⁴⁹ (by Rhea or by Apollo according to various versions) in order to be reborn as the powerful god of ecstasy, of madness – as what is in my opinion the most life-celebrating godhead of Greek mythology. Karoly Kerényi calls the Dionysian cult in its manifold occurrences a “combination of superabundant life and death-dealing power”⁵⁰; this is evident when we think that one of the main points of Dionysian cult was exactly the re-enactment of the *spáragmos*: in particular the Maenads, the female followers of Dionysus, danced and drank themselves to a divine trance that involved madness and violence, screams, physical and spiritual exhilaration that would be seen as vividly life-affirming, in juxtaposition with bloody ritual sacrifices often perpetrated by tearing apart live animals as symbolical substitutes for the god.

Young Friedrich Nietzsche looked carefully into these manifestations of divine collective loss of self during his years as a Greek philology researcher and discovered how the aim of such cruelty, apparently useless and beyond reason, is to find perfect happiness in universal dissolution of self into a living *one*; his intuitions culminated in the groundbreaking volume *The Birth Of Tragedy*, one of the most important commentaries on Greek civilisation and religion. In it the philosopher states that “Dionysian art, too, wishes to convince us of the eternal joy of existence: only we are to seek this joy not in phenomena, but behind them. We are really for a brief moment primordial being itself, one with the infinite primordial joy in existence. In spite of fear and pity, we are the happy living beings, not as individuals, but as the one living being, with whose creative joy we are united”⁵¹, that is to say that ecstasy is not

⁴⁸ Karoly Kerényi, *Dionysos – Archetypal Image Of Indestructible Life*, transl. Ralph Manheim (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1976), p. 245.

⁴⁹ Dionysus’ *spáragmos* finds a strong parallel in Egyptian mythology: “The cutting into parts – not the rending and devouring – calls for comparison with the myth of Osiris. Isis found the parts of her husband’s body and put them together. She reawakened him by setting the male organ in place and uniting herself with him in love” Kerényi 1976, p. 247.

⁵⁰ Kerényi 1976, p. 133.

⁵¹ F. Nietzsche, *The Birth Of Tragedy*, pp. 104-105, in Robert Luyster, “Ecstasy, Heroism,

simply a sensual experience but a metaphysical one, a gateway to a higher dimension that lies beyond the tangible world, provided that individuality gives way to unity. Most importantly, in Nietzsche's words "these Dionysian emotions awake, and as they grow in intensity everything subjective vanishes into complete *self-forgetfulness*"⁵².

More recently, musicologist Michel Poizat has offered an interesting account of the *spáragmos* and on the ideas of unity and separation: "During the ceremonies in honor of Dionysus, god of "mania", of the trance, female devotees would undergo a genuine crisis of mystic possession during which they would wander the countryside, chase down a small animal, dismember it alive and consume it on the spot (see Euripides, *Bacchae*); this is how Zagreus had been torn apart and devoured by the Titans, so that his very *identity* was abolished, since once resuscitated and *made whole*, he appears with a new name – Dionysus [...] through this rite of collective devouring, the Maenads as a group *reconstitute the sundered divine unity*, doing away with the suffering of the dismemberment, of the multiple, through the *ecstatic unity* of the collective body [...] Underlying this cult, then, is a whole mystique of *suffering in differentiation and jouissance in indifferenciation*"⁵³.

Quite surprisingly, in these lines Poizat seems to draw upon the Bataillian ideas of discontinuity and continuity, which he renames as differentiation and indifferenciation⁵⁴. In the introduction to *Eroticism*, and as a foundation of his philosophical discourse about sexual intercourse among human society, Bataille explains how "(sexual) Reproduction implies the existence of *discontinuous* beings. Beings who reproduce themselves are distinct from one another, and those reproduced are likewise distinct from their parents"⁵⁵. Life is born out of a division, a separation⁵⁶, as the process of childbirth vividly demonstrates; as a consequence,

And The Monstrous" in *Journal of Nietzsche Studies*, Issue 21, 2001, p. 5.

⁵² F. Nietzsche, *The Birth Of Tragedy*, 36, In Luyster 2001, p. 7. My italics.

⁵³ Poizat 1992, p. 188.

⁵⁴ From the selected bibliography of the quoted book it is not clear whether Poizat is familiar with Georges Bataille's thought or not. Yet, his choice of words in this passage is unmistakably Bataillian.

⁵⁵ Bataille 1962, p. 12.

⁵⁶ According to Jacques Lacan, the "corps morcelé" (literally, the "fragmented body") is a state of consciousness experienced by the infant prior to the mirror stage, in which the infant is not yet aware of itself as a unified entity but focuses on parts of its body one at a time. As such, this cognitive dismemberment can be associated with a notion of pre-subjective existence: the fragmented body does not own a self but a "pre-self". See <http://web.utk.edu/~misty/486lacan.html>.

“death means continuity of being”⁵⁷. In death, all individual and discontinuous beings reunite in a state of indistinct, tautological *non-being*, an unbroken and unbreakable *oneness*. This primordial oneness is not only typical of mere death, but also of all those states in which a human being can suspend his/her self-awareness and temporarily plunge into a sort of non-existence. “We yearn for our lost continuity. We find the state of affairs that binds us to our random and ephemeral individuality hard to bear”⁵⁸, that is to say, we look for a way to forget our discontinuity, to *lose our-selves*: therefore we use the ecstasy of eroticism, or of mysticism, as a means to recover the lost oneness with the all. Hence Poizat’s reading of the Maenads’ cult and his stress on the “ecstatic unity” they long for.

On a more specifically mythological tone, again in *The Birth Of Tragedy* Nietzsche states that “In truth, however, the hero of Greek tragedy is the suffering Dionysus of the mysteries, the god experiencing in himself the agonies of individuation, of whom wonderful myths tell that as a boy he was torn to pieces by the Titans and now is worshipped in this state as Zagreus. Thus it is intimated that this dismemberment, the properly Dionysian suffering, is like a transformation into air, water, earth, and fire, that we are therefore to regard the state of individuation as the origin and primal cause of all suffering, as something objectionable in itself”⁵⁹. These poetic words resound with a sentiment of *cupio dissolvi* and maybe, it could be argued, with a precognition of Nietzsche’s future lapse into madness, a condition in which he possibly found relief from the human, all too human condition of being “dejected”⁶⁰ in life.

Georges Bataille was a keen reader of Nietzsche, as is evident from his diary-commentary *On Nietzsche*, and knew the philosophical complexity, as well as the existential importance, of Dionysus’ *spáragnos*. In fact he himself experienced a psychological shock when he came in contact with pictures of a real dismemberment, the Chinese torture called “ling chi”. As Jonathan David York powerfully recounts, “In Paris his analyst hands him a photograph: a Chinese man undergoing the ‘death of a hundred pieces’, is lashed to a pole. His arms have been severed just beneath the

⁵⁷ Bataille 1962, p. 12.

⁵⁸ Bataille 1962, p. 15.

⁵⁹ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth Of Tragedy And The Case Of Wagner*, transl. Walter Kaufmann (New York, NY: Vintage Books, 1967), p. 73.

⁶⁰ “Dejection”, or “thrownness”, is the word Martin Heidegger uses to describe the existential condition of human beings being arbitrarily thrown into existence regardless of their own will. See M. Heidegger, *Being And Time*.

shoulders and his legs are missing below the knees. The chest has been cut away exposing the ribcage and vital organs underneath. While these wounds are almost unbearable to look at, perhaps the most disturbing gash is the smile on the uplifted face of the victim, Fou Tchou Li, blinded by the sun. The analyst encourages his patient's own *little death* of a hundred pieces, the self-dissolution that precipitates the more-than-human consciousness of *Apollo-Dionysus*.⁶¹ The pictures of Fou Tchou Li, taken by Louis Carpeaux, are now reproduced in Bataille's *The Tears Of Eros*⁶². It is interesting, if not at all surprising, how York chooses to assimilate Bataille's shock to sexual *jouissance* by calling it a "little death". This is not the first time that *ling chi* appears in the history of psychoanalysis: Freud himself recalls one of his patients, called the Rat-man, describing the same practice to him; "in his description of the torture, his face took on a very strange composite expression. 'I [Freud] could only interpret it as one of horror at pleasure of his own of which he himself was unaware.' (Ibid., pp. 166–167) In other words, the Rat-man is terrorized by the sadistic *jouissance* that lives inside of him"⁶³. Once again the word *jouissance* seems to be inseparable from the inextricable union of pleasure and pain.

Finally, it must be noticed that quite often physical pain and mystical ecstasy cross paths as two different means to reach the same vision of God: "perhaps no other major world religion endows pain with greater spiritual significance than Christianity, and among Christians none spoke so directly to the issue of suffering as the mystics of late medieval and early modern Europe"⁶⁴. The torments inflicted on the saints martyred by the Roman Empire, or the self-inflicted torments of the mystics who aimed at imitating their predecessors' martyrdom speak volumes for the mystic power of pain. More recently, French horror film *Martyrs*⁶⁵ (Pascal Laugier, 2008) presents its main character, Anna, reaching the vision of God after enduring years of physical torture culminating in flaying. All torture is performed on her by nurse-like

⁶¹ York 2003, p. 42.

⁶² Georges Bataille, *The Tears Of Eros*, transl. Peter Connor (San Francisco, CA: City Lights, 1989), pp. 204-206.

⁶³ Frédéric Declercq, "Lacan's Concept Of The Real Of *Jouissance*: Clinical Illustrations And Implications", in *Psychoanalysis, Culture & Society*, vol. 9. 2004 (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan), p. 240.

⁶⁴ Maureen Flynn, "The Spiritual Uses Of Pain In Spanish Mysticism", in *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, vol. 64, No. 2, 1996 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), p. 257.

⁶⁵ http://www.imdb.com/title/tt1029234/?ref_=sr_1.

servants in a ritual, quasi-religious way and purely with the purpose of triggering mystical ecstasy in her⁶⁶.

Whether or not director Laugier knows the philosophers I've been quoting so far or is conscious of the connections outlined above, his film marks the culturally significant concurrence of pain and ecstasy in Western (Christian) culture. It is no accident that when Anna reaches union with God she does not speak and the only physical sign of her having reached a higher state is in her suddenly pacified gaze: in ecstasy there is no space for the rational, for language, for *lógos*⁶⁷ - in Catherine Clément's words, "[when being a mystic], although one has the right to scream, to stammer, or to sing, it is forbidden to articulate"⁶⁸; to reinforce her position, Clément also mentions the words of Medieval mystic Angela of Foligno: "nothing can even be stammered any longer (...) Do not approach, human word"⁶⁹. At the end of the film, only after coming back from her mystic experience can Anna mutter a few incomprehensible syllables to describe what she has seen, but the response to this final bout of rational language can only be death: her own, and that of the listener who gathers her testimony⁷⁰.

⁶⁶ Transcendence sequence, see

http://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=player_embedded&v=5_qn2bOD5fU.

⁶⁷ The relationship between voice, rational word and irrational scream will be examined in depth in the next chapter.

⁶⁸ Catherine Clément, Julia Kristeva, *The Feminine And The Sacred*, transl. Jane Marie Todd (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2001), p. 59.

⁶⁹ Clément, Kristeva 2001, p. 68.

⁷⁰ The Greek word *mártyros* originally means "witness".

2. 3 SEXUAL JOUISSANCE

I have tangentially touched the theme of eroticism in the previous chapters; most of the ideas I will express in this one should already be clear to the reader. To tell the truth, that *jouissance* in sexual orgasm can lead the individual towards self-dissolution, or can tear the *jouissant* self apart, is evident and can be experienced in life. It has to be noted that when I talk about sex I do not mean the sanitised, over-aestheticized genital gymnastics marketed on a daily basis by the media, nor am I giving any importance to sentiments such as love, care, tenderness; I want to focus on sex as a powerful near-death, out-of-body experience, the path and the threshold to a different life dimension. The reason I have decided to talk about mysticism first, then about excruciating physical pain and finally about sex, which at first sight seems to be the most common experience of the three, is that I think sex should be invested of the sacredness and intensity of the other two; moreover, in this chapter I would like to refer again to the fascinating (and quite fitting for this dissertation's purposes) theories of Georges Bataille, who saw eroticism as a cultural consequence to the continuous *severance* (the passage from continuity to discontinuity) between living beings that occurs in nature. Curiously, in the 4th Century BC Plato had already had the right intuition and in his *Symposium*, he has playwright Aristophanes telling the "Myth of the Androgyne": mankind used to live in a primeval blissful state in which individuals, male and female, were "fused" together two by two; but Zeus saw that these creatures were getting dangerously powerful and decided to cut them in two. From that moment, every individual has been longing in sorrow for a reunion with his/her severed half, be it male or female⁷¹. This same idea that the erotic instinct is born out of a lack, of a nostalgia, resurfaces in Jacques Lacan's thought, according to which, as I mentioned earlier⁷² "while the desire for *jouissance* may produce symptoms, it does not involve instinctual drives per se but is the retroactive effect of *becoming a separate subject*, which leaves a permanent ache of desire in its wake"⁷³. But what is this nostalgia about? What is the erotic quest for? What is this abstract

⁷¹ See Plato, *Symposium*. Plato's myth also provides with a disarmingly natural explanation for homosexuality – remarkably, many modern civilisations do not show the same tolerance towards this issue.

⁷² See p. 9, note 27.

⁷³ Lewis A. Kirshner, "Rethinking Desire: The *Objet Petit A* in Lacanian Theory", in *Journal of the American Psychoanalytical Association*, 2005, 53:83, p. 85. Also available at <http://apa.sagepub.com/content/53/1/83>. My italics.

objet that mankind has lost and that the other, the one(s) we carnally unite with, might be able to give us back?

In order to find out, first we have to take a look at the links between erotic and religious ecstasy; the foreword to Bataille's *Eroticism* opens with a very precise stance: "Man goes constantly in fear of himself. His erotic urges terrify him. The saint turns from the voluptuary in alarm: she does not know that his unacknowledgeable passions and her own *are really one*"⁷⁴. Here the writer underestimates the openness of some saints who seem to know better: I have already pointed out how Teresa of Avila herself in her writings famously underlined the physical and jouissant side to the mystical ecstasy that pervaded her⁷⁵. In one of her many colourful and clever remarks, Catherine Clément informs her correspondent Julia Kristeva of "the frequent bisexuality of mystics (...) Michel de Certeau, a Jesuit scholar outside the law of his order noted that Teresa of Avila's nickname was *il padrecito*, the little father"⁷⁶; not an easily verifiable information, nor actually a very important one – but one that sheds a new light on Teresa and the extension of her sensual world: indeed, according to Clément mystics do not repress their erotic urges nor they necessarily channel them into a purely spiritual experience, but fully enjoy sexuality regardless of their vows. Another Carmelite like Teresa, Father Tesson (tellingly, the author of an essay called *Sexualité, Morale Et Mystique*), is mentioned by Bataille as an unswerving proponent of eroticism as a natural force that is not at all opposed to a pious, religious life; in his opinion "two forces attract us towards God: one, sexuality, is written into our nature; the other one, mysticism, comes from

⁷⁴ Bataille 1962, p. 7. My italics.

⁷⁵ Neuroscience has recently shed some light on the complex relationship between the mystical experience and sexual orgasm: a recent experiment made on the brain of a woman who was monitored while having an orgasm in an MRI machine (See Ian Sample, "Female Orgasm Captured In Series Of Brain Scans", in <http://www.guardian.co.uk/science/2011/nov/14/female-orgasm-recorded-brain-scans>) and another experiment made on a group of Carmelite nuns while being induced a mystical trance show how the same parts of the brain, notably the limbic and thalamic systems, are involved in these two different, yet very similar, experiences. See Todd R. Murphy, "The Role Of Religious And Mystic Experiences In Human Evolution: A Corollary Hypothesis For NeuroTheology", in *NeuroQuantology* Vol. 8, Issue 4, December 2010, 495-508. I want to make it clear that I am not a neuroscientist and I am not entitled to draw scientific conclusions from my knowledge of the human nervous system; however, I found this path of study extremely interesting and fascinating. Also, it provided remarkable inspiration for my music as I will illustrate in the second part of this dissertation.

⁷⁶ Clément, Kristeva 2001, p. 57.

Christ”⁷⁷, and “In so far as he is willing to enslave the present to the future he (man) is self-satisfied, conceited, and mediocre and prevented by selfishness from approaching the life Father Tesson called divine and which may also be more broadly called sacred [...] Beyond pride and mediocrity we keep glimpsing a terrifying truth”⁷⁸. This is what eroticism and mysticism have in common: they both open up the self to a higher dimension, whereas everyday life compresses it into a small existential space.

It is in this higher dimension that mankind can find what it is originally yearning for. The material, banal world we usually find ourselves in is described in Bataillan terms as “the realm of discontinuity”, where discontinuous beings find themselves; in psychoanalytical terms, “desire, if it operates within the pleasure principle of symbolic social reality, cannot attain jouissance, which lies beyond, unassimilable to any satisfaction that could be represented in the symbolic dimension”⁷⁹. However, from this dimension those discontinuous beings can spring up, losing themselves, or *their selves*, in order to make sense of the unbearable existential condition I have already mentioned: their dejection. “We find the state of affairs that binds us to our random and ephemeral individuality hard to bear. Along with our tormenting desire that this evanescent thing should last, there stands our obsession with a primal continuity linking us with everything that is”⁸⁰. The world is made heavy by a deathly charge; but while this frightens and anguishes, it also attracts. Death is a *mysterium fascinans et tremendum*, it accompanies mankind as it strives, often through eroticism, and reaches out for it; we could even say that this sense of death is exactly what makes eroticism possible and vice versa, the two being lusciously entwined into an umbilical cord that joins the individual with the Absolute, “the erotic bond that links (mankind) to death, to cadavers and to horrible physical pain”⁸¹.

It is then completely evident, and not at all paradoxical, how the more eroticism aims to be life-affirming, and the more the traditional, archetypal liaison *eros/thanatos* becomes apparent. Historian Philippe Ariés notices that in the course of

⁷⁷ Father Tesson, *Sexualité, Morale Et Mystique*, in Bataille 1962, p. 227.

⁷⁸ Bataille 1962, p. 233.

⁷⁹ Lewis A. Kirshner, “Rethinking Desire: The *Objet Petit A* In Lacanian Theory” in *Journal Of The American Psychoanalytical Association*, 2005 53:83, p. 91. Also available at <http://apa.sagepub.com/content/53/1/83>

⁸⁰ Bataille 1962, p. 15.

⁸¹ Georges Bataille, “The Use-Value Of D. A. F. de Sade” in Fred Botting, Scott Wilson (eds.), *The Bataille Reader* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1997), p. 157.

modern history, an important change of tide in Western death iconography and “in the world of erotic phantasms”⁸²: although he does not provide an exhaustive explanation of the reason why this happens⁸³, he notices that “From the sixteenth to the eighteenth centuries, countless scenes or motifs in art and in literature associate death with love, Thanatos with Eros. These are erotico-macabre themes, or simply morbid ones, which reveal extreme complaisance before the spectacles of death, suffering, and torture (...) When Bernini portrayed the mystic union of St. Theresa of Avila with God, he juxtaposed the images of the death agony and the orgasmic trance (...) Like the sexual act, death was henceforth increasingly thought of as a transgression which tears man from his daily life, from rational society, from his monotonous work, in order to make him undergo a paroxysm, plunging him into an irrational, violent, and beautiful world. Like the sexual act death for the Marquis de Sade is a break, a rupture”⁸⁴.

The artistic epiphany of eroticism into death and vice versa is actually an enlightenment, a denouement, a badly needed coming to terms with mankind’s manifold nature. In death, mankind transcends itself and reconnects with its God-inventing faculty. In death we see God, we see ourselves as Gods, we become Gods. The rupture, the discontinuity, the symbolic dismemberment that underlies all erotic activity is only a temporary condition, a *conditio sine qua non* to make us long for continuity, where our divine double awaits. “The transition from the normal state to that of erotic desire presupposes a partial dissolution of the person as he exists in the realm of discontinuity [...] the whole business of eroticism is to destroy the self-contained character of the participators as they are in their normal lives”⁸⁵. Through the “little death” provided by jouissance, eroticism raises a mirror in front of our souls where we can contemplate our own death, the ecstasy of nonexistence; in this mirror, the union with everything that *is* collapses and melts into the union with everything that *is not*. Fou Tchou Li, John of the Cross, Teresa of Avila, the Maenads, they all looked into this mirror; and there they found their own divinity.

⁸² Philippe Ariés, *Western Attitudes Towards Death* (Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1974), p. 58.

⁸³ This subject would need a close and deep historical examination in itself, but it is not the aim of this dissertation.

⁸⁴ Ariés 1974, pp. 56-57.

⁸⁵ Bataille 1962, p. 17.

CHAPTER 3

THE ETERNAL RETURN OF DISCONTINUITY

The only problem with jouissance/orgasm/little death is that it doesn't last forever; as powerful as it may be, it is never able to provide a complete and eternal dissolution of the self, unlike *real death*⁸⁶. The erotic act has a series of crescendos of intensity, reaches an apex and then through its resolution it brings the individual back to a situation of relax (the same, as we will see, can be said about mystical experiences). The most bitter and ironic trick of the human condition is that it can only catch a rare and fleeting glimpse of its best state, and spend the rest of its time sulking in nostalgia until that state comes near again. "The paradox of eroticism is that complete fulfilment is not possible"⁸⁷, in that bodies can surely penetrate each other but cannot physically or psychically fuse and melt into one. Love is a psychological construct (obviously linked to eroticism) that reinforces the illusion that eroticism really is the way to obtain fulfilment; but it ends up being intrinsically deceptive as it inspires us to go on in our never ending search for a complete loss of self: "Only the beloved can in this world bring about what our human limitations deny, a total blending of two beings, a continuity between two discontinuous creatures. Hence love spells suffering for us in so far as it is a quest for the impossible"⁸⁸. This is not to say that love, the sentimental side of eroticism, should be rejected – but it has to be clear that it has limitations we cannot trespass, if not at the expense of our lives or our sanity. To believe the sirens of jouissance, to want our newfound spark of divinity to stay with us indefinitely in time, makes us sink into a profound delusion; in psychoanalytical terms, to mix the symbolic with the real may lead to psychosis⁸⁹.

The reason why God (the God we find through loss of self) is unattainable and never reachable is because, as I posited at the beginning, it is a human invention that does not exist "externally", as a given; since the divine abstract dwells infinitely deep inside ourselves, the only way to approach it is to dig deeper and deeper, writhing and

⁸⁶ Especially death by ling chi. But since the dead cannot experience Eternal Return, in this chapter I will only mention dismemberment in a figurative way.

⁸⁷ Jan Kott, "A Short Treatise On Eroticism" in *The Memory Of The Body: Essays On Theater And Death*, transl. Boleslaw Taborski (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2000), p. 91.

⁸⁸ Bataille 1962, p. 20.

⁸⁹ See Kirshner, p. 2005.

coiling endlessly like a Mandelbrot fractal, leaving the world of the living (of discontinuity) farther and farther behind us, and still keeping the awareness that no matter how long in life we dig, we will never arrive to our final destination⁹⁰. The most powerful orgasm and/or mystical ecstasy are surely near-death experiences but exactly because they are only “near”-death, actual death is never reached and the *self-less* subject always falls back into a normal, *self-conscious* state. This sense of “mystical hangover” tormented Teresa of Avila and led her to write her famous poem and plea “I die because I do not die”⁹¹: no matter how intense were the “favours” (instances of mystical ecstasy) that God graced her with, she still suffered because they came to an end. Unsurprisingly, Bataille interprets her words in a vitalistic way, underlining how shocking and extreme the feelings she experienced were: “the death of not dying is precisely not death; it is the ultimate stage of life; if I die because I cannot die it is on condition that I live on [...] she lost her footing but all she did was to live more violently, so violently that she could say she was on the threshold of dying”⁹². This curse of repetition is not dissimilar to the ideas of *samsara* (blind attachment to worldliness, endless craving for existence, joyless cycles of rebirth) as opposed to *nirvana* (blissful stillness) that Arthur Schopenhauer, the first Western philosopher to study Buddhism and Eastern religions⁹³, examined in *The World As Will And Representation*⁹⁴. But *nirvana*, as its very definition implies, does not belong to this world; even in their most powerful mystical or sensual flight, the subject remains anchored to the cycle of life.

Although the human condition, presented in these terms, seems to be forlorn and condemned to failure, the neverending quest for jouissance, for God, for death needs not be seen in such a pessimistic light; Dionysus and his “disciple” Nietzsche (through his doctrine of the Eternal Return of the same) show us the way. To start

⁹⁰ Those versed in deep meditation will probably recognise elements of their practice in these words.

⁹¹ Translated here: <http://feastofsaints.com/teresadie.htm>.

⁹² Bataille 1962, p. 240.

⁹³ Despite his remarkable curiosity and importance for the development of Western philosophy, Schopenhauer is now no longer considered a believable expert in Buddhism; to his credit, he did popularise Buddhism in Europe and sparked a wide interest in Asian religions, however there are now claims that he twisted Buddhist philosophy to fit his own pessimistic anti-Hegelian agenda. See R. Raj Singh, *Schopenhauer: A Guide For The Perplexed* (New York, NY: Continuum Books 2010).

⁹⁴ See A. Schopenhauer, *The World As Will And Representation*, transl. E. F. J. Payne (New York, NY: Dover Publications 1969).

with, Dionysus' *spáragmos* is a necessary prerequisite for his rebirth and triumph⁹⁵: Nietzsche notes that "Dionysus cut to pieces is a promise of life: it will ... return again from destruction"⁹⁶ while Karoly Kerényi reports the words of historian Diodorus, who compared the god's dismemberment and the subsequent gathering of his pieces by Demeter to the cycle of seasons: "when the vine has been heavily pruned after the wine harvest, the earth restores it in order that it may bear fruit again in due season"⁹⁷ (in fact, the vine is a sacred plant to Dionysus); analogously, the animal sacrifices performed by the Maenads with their bare hands were propitiatory rituals to be repeated cyclically every second winter near spring⁹⁸. From the start of his career as an ancient Greek translator and philologist, Nietzsche plunges head-first into the ambivalence and intricacy of the Dionysian religion and highlights how drenched in cyclical, nature-based elements it is; in fact he talks about the "Dionysian world of the eternally self-creating, the eternally self-destroying, this mystery world of the twofold voluptuous delight, my 'beyond good and evil,' without goal, unless *the joy of the circle is itself a goal*"⁹⁹.

This pure joy of awareness of universal life transformation is what Nietzsche referred to when he, literarily disguised as Zarathustra, begged mankind to remain "true to the Earth"¹⁰⁰ and when he devised the theory of the Eternal Return: upon accepting the idea that all that has been will be again, mankind is liberated from the chains of teleology. David Rowe argues that this theory, apparently drenched in nihilism and pessimistic senselessness, effectively overcomes nihilism and generates a renewed "ethical imperative" full of sense and life-affirmance: "It (the idea of Eternal Return) provides a burden upon one in that it requires one's (psychological) acceptance of the following condition for every action: 'live in every moment so that you *could* will that moment back again over and over' for, according to the eternal recurrence as cosmological doctrine, you *will* live that moment over and over

⁹⁵ The magic practice of dismemberment as a means to rebirth has a humorous, if tragic, counterpart in the myth of Medea and Pelias <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pelias>.

⁹⁶ F. Nietzsche, *The Will To Power* in Robert Luyster, "Ecstasy, Heroism, And The Monstrous" in *Journal of Nietzsche Studies*, Issue 21, 2001, p. 22. In this essay Luyster daringly and endearingly suggests that Nietzsche's mind might have suffered its own *spáragmos* when it was "torn apart" by madness; like Dionysus he died in misery and then resurged in glory, rediscovered as the great philosopher he is.

⁹⁷ Kerényi 1976, p. 249.

⁹⁸ Kerényi 1976, p. 235.

⁹⁹ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Will To Power*, transl. Walter Kaufmann and R. J. Hollingdale (New York, NY: Vintage, 1968), p. 550. In York 2003, p. 52. My italics.

¹⁰⁰ F. Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, p. 42.

regardless”¹⁰¹; in a famous allegory from *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, a shepherd is crushed by a black snake coiled around his body and stuck to his tongue; but following Zarathustra’s advice he bites back until he chops its head off; when the shepherd springs up he is “no longer a shepherd, no longer a man - a transformed being, surrounded by light, laughing!”¹⁰².

Bataille’s view of the life/death cycle is even more evocative and poetic: “I picture nature as a play of forces expressed in multiplied and incessant agony ... I imagine the earth turning vertiginously in the sky ... Everything that exists destroying itself, consuming itself and dying, each instant producing itself only in the annihilation of the preceding one... Before the terrestrial world whose summer and winter order the agony of all living things, before the universe composed of innumerable turning stars, limitlessly losing and consuming themselves, I only perceive a succession of cruel splendors whose very movement requires that I die: this death is only the *exploding* consumption of all that was, the joy of existence of all that comes into the world; even my own life demands that everything that exists, everywhere, ceaselessly give itself and be annihilated”¹⁰³. In this perspective, coming back to a normal state after *jouissance* is simply in the order of things and must be regarded not just as necessary, but as good and right in itself.

We have to admit that the human condition is invincible, unconquerable; if we stop following the cycle of arousal, orgasm and resolution that characterises our human, all too human eroticism *we are no more*, we become something else, we cast ourselves away to the realm of death instead of that of life – disregarding the fact that life is already permeated by a fleeting, blessed and accursed share of death. We have to be content with losing our selves from time to time and then find them again. But how can we be happy with such a measly portion of divinity? Isn’t this condition alike to that of Prometheus, forced to suffer from a constantly renewing wound and to experience only brief moments of relative respite? Why don’t we rebel against such a cruel destiny? This might be the reason behind asceticism, but not all of us believe it a viable solution; the majority of mankind is simply trapped by their own overflowing

¹⁰¹ D. Rowe, “The Eternal Return Of The Same: Nietzsche’s “Value-free” Revaluation Of All Values”, in *Parrhesia*, No. 15, 2012, p. 76.

¹⁰² F. Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, p. 180.

¹⁰³ Georges Bataille, *Visions of Excess: Selected Writings, 1927-1939*, ed. Allan Stoekl, transl. A. Stoekl, Carl R. Lovitt and Donald M. Leslie, Jr. (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1985), p. 237-39. In York 2003, p. 52.

life. What makes us go on, then? What instinct guides our search for jouissance? I believe I have identified this instinct with what the Greeks called *anánke*, “necessity”: an unstoppable repetition compulsion is what keeps us wanting to unite in sex even if we know all too well that our orgasm is never going to be absolute; the same *anánke* is what keeps us progressing in our spiritual quest even if “we die because we cannot die”: “St. Theresa used to say that even if Hell were to swallow her up she could not but persevere”¹⁰⁴. We know how Prometheus was finally freed of his torment, and how his wound subsequently healed, when Zeus accepted to trade a precious piece of information with him¹⁰⁵ - but he was a Titan, whereas we humans have no external God to haggle with. So we have to keep suffering the pain of our own wound; what is worse, we have to realize that if we really wanted our wound to heal, we would have to leave the human condition behind. We would have to be no longer ourselves. Paradoxically, we would have to die.

Once again, this does not need to be a pessimistic view; French existentialist philosopher Albert Camus has examined the figure of Sisyphus (who in Hell was condemned to roll a big stone up a hill, watch it fall and repeat the action *in aeterno*) as a metaphor for the alienation of modern man, however this myth can also be used for a more universal purpose, leaving epochs and politics aside. Once Sisyphus takes awareness of his condition, of how he himself is the cause of it and of its immutability, his curse ceases to be a burden; “The struggle itself towards the heights is enough to fill a man’s heart. One must imagine Sisyphus happy”¹⁰⁶. We also must not forget how the endeavours to reach a higher dimension and a heightened state can be ultimately pleasurable, or at least captivating, enough for us to keep seeking them – even agreed physical pain, as every devout of sadomasochism¹⁰⁷ can testify, is pleasurable in its own way; *anánke* might be a blind force but not a senseless one, as the English post-punk-industrial band Killing Joke fully understood: “Understanding the meaning of struggle / Giving your whole life to a single passion / (...) / Getting

¹⁰⁴ Bataille 1962, p. 263.

¹⁰⁵ See Karoly Kerényi, *Prometheus – Archetypal Image Of Human Existence*, transl. Ralph Manheim (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press 1963).

¹⁰⁶ Albert Camus, *The Myth Of Sisyphus*, transl. Justin O’Brien (London: Penguin, 2005), p. 119.

¹⁰⁷ The reason why I haven’t investigated sadomasochism but have rather focused on sex and pain as separate experiences is that I consider sadomasochism an all too complex subject in itself that would have made me stray from the primary path trodden by this work.

knocked down every time / Getting knocked down every moment / You get up, *until you love getting up*¹⁰⁸.

The Maenad's hands are still streaked with the blood of a goat; she rests her fatigued limbs and throat, her heart rate and her breath slow down, her vagina stops contracting, her speech faculty slowly resurfaces; "A tempest seizes everything that has outlived itself, everything that is decayed, broken, and withered, and, whirling, shrouds it in a cloud of red dust to carry it into the air like a vulture. Confused, our eyes look after what has disappeared; for what they see has been raised as from a depression into golden light, so full and green, so amply alive, immeasurable and full of yearning"¹⁰⁹. We go on - as we must.

¹⁰⁸ Killing Joke, "Struggle" from *Extremities, Dirt And Various Repressed Emotions* (F.A.D. Records, 1990). My italics. See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SANRCgEDP1w>

¹⁰⁹ F. Nietzsche, *The Birth Of Tragedy*, 20, in Kerényi 1976, p. 134.

CHAPTER 4

VOICE AND JOUISSANCE

Just like the man-made ecstatic God I illustrated before, voice is something that dwells deep inside of us; voice is not an external given, voice *is* not; voice *happens* to the voicing subject like a “favour”, to use Teresa of Avila’s words. Or to use Steven Connor’s, “my voice is not something that I merely have, or even something that I, if only in part, am. Rather, it is something that I do. A voice is not a condition, nor yet an attribute, but an event. It is less something that exists than something which occurs”¹¹⁰. Even when voice leaves the subject and goes out to reach a listener, it can’t be externalised, it retains its roots as an internal event; voice is a human being’s innermost musical instrument, the most direct expression of their feelings both in the flesh and in the psyche, which explains its tremendous emotional power; and when it takes the shape of singing, it can upsurge with the urgency of tragedy. As a musician and a vocalist it is my contention that the singing voice, rather than any other sound, is the best tool mankind can use to reflect, represent and *communicate* the themes I have talked about in the philosophical part of this dissertation, especially loss of self and the union with the divine; it is no accident that Michel Poizat talks about Wagner’s operas as “an ecstasy that always carries the risk of self-loss for those who pursue it”¹¹¹. It should be noted that the voice I am talking about, despite carrying a meaning in its singing, is not necessarily linked to language; in fact I will later expand on what the presence of the word psychologically signifies and what the articulation of words physically entails for the singer.

Before starting, though, I need to point out that my research will mainly examine female voices/vocalists. This is partly due to my being a woman and therefore relating to female vocalism better than to male vocalism, and partly because of the way vocal music history has developed and has influenced my own composition. In fact, what we call “classical opera” is ostensibly the realm of soprano voices; despite the supremacy of castrati during the Baroque era, after the start of their progressive demise it was up to female singers to provide the audience with the “vocal jouissance” of high-pitched notes. In a private interview given to me in summer

¹¹⁰ Steven Connor, *Dumbstruck – A Cultural History Of Ventriloquism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 2000), p. 4.

¹¹¹ Poizat 1992, p. 126.

2013, Italian counter-tenor Ernesto Tomasini¹¹² talks about a self-proclaimed “sexual police” who, willing to instill moral rectitude in France after the Revolution had plunged the country into chaos, made sure that castrati, the protégés of aristocrats, would be marked as freaks of nature and progressively forbidden to perform¹¹³. Of course this precaution did not lead to a decrease in performances of the operas originally written for castrati, but to a “normalisation” of gender roles on stage. While the theoretical disputes and gender wars inspired by music might sound ridiculous to the modern reader, it has to be remembered that music in general is a serious matter¹¹⁴ that can never be separated from the time and society in which it is born and whose customs it reflects¹¹⁵; it should not be surprising that often its composition and performance had to be regulated on moral grounds: “It is a texture so fundamental that any license inevitably produces general decadence; it undermines the social fabric, its laws and mores, and threatens the very ontological order. For one must assign an ontological status to music: it holds the key to a harmony between "nature" and "culture," the natural and the man-made law”¹¹⁶. As I will try to demonstrate in the next chapters, I believe that the questions of God, sex and jouissance are especially central to the role of women in society and therefore to female vocal music.

Voice can provoke irrational emotional reactions because it¹¹⁷ is an unfiltered display of the voicing subject’s innermost feelings, of their nakedness; but as a constant exchange of something that “comes and goes” as Connor points out, as an alternate current of *power*, it also demands the same nakedness from the listener; a dialogue happens as a metaphorical sexual intercourse between two voices. When Slavoj Žižek rhetorically asks “Is voice as a catalyst of love, not the medium of hypnotic power par excellence, the medium of disarming the other's protective shield, of gaining direct control over him or her and submitting him or her to our

¹¹² See <http://www.ernestotomasini.com/>.

¹¹³ See Mladen Dolar, “The Object Voice” in *Gaze And Voice As Love Objects*, eds. Renata Salecl and Slavoj Žižek (Durham: Duke University Press 1996), p. 24.

¹¹⁴ See quote 2 at p. 1 of this dissertation.

¹¹⁵ For a politically broader view on this subject, see the idea of “accommodation of music to power” in Jacques Attali, *Noise – The Political Economy Of Music*, transl. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis, MN: University Of Minnesota Press, 2009), p. 119.

¹¹⁶ Dolar 1996, p. 18.

¹¹⁷ Like gaze, according to Dolar.

will?”¹¹⁸ we already know, as we have already experienced the erotic power of voicing and *being voiced*. Actors and singers know exactly how erotically influential their voices can be, as Anne Karpf illustrates in her book *The Human Voice – The Story Of A Remarkable Talent*¹¹⁹ with plenty of anecdotes. It comes as no surprise that voice can be used in enactments of sexual sadomasochism; it is Steven Connor, again, informing the reader that “in a paper of 1958 entitled “Early Auditory Experiences, Beating Fantasies and Primal Scene”, William Niederland narrated case histories of patients who derived erotic satisfaction from being subjected to physical and sexual abuse accompanied by violent vocal assault”¹²⁰.

The shocking, tantalising power of the voice is heightened when, instead of talking, it sings; this was clearly understood at the dawning of opera, probably the most apt musical genres to showcase voice as the term *belcanto* proves. In his book *The Angel’s Cry – Beyond The Pleasure Principle In Opera*, Michel Poizat gives an extremely intense testimony of the interior turmoil in a woman’s soul caused by Monteverdi’s sensational *Orfeo*: “After attending a performance of *Orfeo*, Julie de Lespinasse writes: ‘I could listen to that aria ten times a day; it tears me apart, sends me into an *ecstasy of sorrow*. I have lost my Eurydice... That music drives me mad: it sweeps me away, my soul craves this kind of pain’.”¹²¹ The ecstasy and the craving felt by Lespinasse, to which every opera lover can relate, is what Poizat calls *vocal jouissance*, consciously borrowing the sexual term I have already talked about; in musical terms, *jouissance* must be intended as the catharsis, accompanied by strong emotions and sometimes by tears, experienced by the listener as an effect of the climactic melodic progression. Later on Poizat illustrates a revolutionary, if counter-intuitive theory, by turning Catherine Clément’s too literal (and often annoyingly contrived) idea of opera as “the undoing of women”¹²² on its feet, switching cause and consequence in describing the event of *jouissance* in operatic scores: obtaining the effect of *jouissance*, in his opinion, is the reason that requires a soprano (or a castrato, in *Orfeo*’s case; but Poizat’s analysis centres on classical opera and its

¹¹⁸ Renata Salecl, Slavoj Žižek, “Introduction” in *Gaze And Voice As Love Objects*, p. 3.

¹¹⁹ See Anne Karpf, *The Human Voice – The Story Of A Remarkable Talent* (London: Bloomsbury 2006). This book is so rife with facts that it is often difficult to single out one quote or one page to prove one’s point.

¹²⁰ Connor 2000, p. 28.

¹²¹ Poizat 1992, p. 5. My italics.

¹²² See Catherine Clément, *Opera Or The Undoing Of Women*, transl. Betsy Wing (Minneapolis, MN: University Of Minnesota Press, 1988).

strongly gendered tropes) to reach always higher-pitched notes, or even cries as we will see at a later stage, in order to increase the aria's dramatic weight – but this in turn requires the soprano role to go through a credible ordeal to justify those notes: “It is not because the dramatic logic of the libretto has led the female character to her death that she cries out at that moment; it is because a logic of vocal jouissance is at work and is driving at the cry that the dramatic conditions necessary for its occurrence are created, demanding a death, for example”¹²³. As if to say: music comes first, and then comes the story, the *lógos*.

For historic and social reasons firmly rooted in human psyche, female voice is usually considered to be a better vessel for feelings, emotions, sensuality – and for jouissance. In fact, female voice has always seemed dangerous, a threat to the orderly, man-led society: Karpf thoroughly recalls several social prohibitions aimed at silencing women, from sacred texts to Greek philosophers to religious preachers, including a relatively recent belief: “as late as the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries it was argued that, if women persisted in speaking in public, their uteruses would dry up”¹²⁴; the writer also disposes of the common place according to which women are “chatty”, proving that men, across ages and countries, have always felt more confident in expressing their voice and therefore have always talked more, whilst this didn't stop them from perceiving any word coming from a woman's mouth as one word too many. Interestingly, Karpf also talks about the difficulties women traditionally had to face when seeking a job in the radio - they had their breakthrough only when WWII deprived studios of men and the media simply needed to hire other available voices.

If both “woman” and “voice” are strong signifiers of jouissance, then their union must be even more powerful and therefore dangerous: a talking woman, or even so a singing woman, is a hypersexualised one¹²⁵. The act of singing is especially sensual in itself: “...all the key concepts [...] to describe the voice as an object of jouissance are found: loss; inaccessibility; evanescence; impossibility and therefore prohibition; the source of a quest, of an asymptotic desire; the deified object [...], dangerous if not

¹²³ Poizat 1992, p. 145.

¹²⁴ Karpf 2006, p.157.

¹²⁵ This is evident when examining the role of women in the contemporary popular music scene.

deadly in its seduction”¹²⁶. Italian academic Serena Guarracino describes the body of the soprano as a physical event where a “superimposition between mouth and vagina”¹²⁷ takes place; “the power of the voice resides in the female body of the primadonna, an extraordinary body capable of performances that push the human limit”¹²⁸. In my own experience as a woman and as a vocalist I have frequently come across the telluric and jouissant effects of singing, both on myself and on the listener; voice shows and is born out of the singer’s physical strength and skill, but it can also involuntarily reveal their psychological vulnerability. Like sexual jouissance, voice is a double edged sword, a glorious and violent tool that could turn against its user, its effectiveness (on the singer and the listener alike) being the result of a constantly unstable balance of physical and psychological control: but just like when experiencing sexual jouissance, in order to be fully, blissfully crushed by its powerful effect, the voicing/jouissant subject has to surrender to it, they have to lose control - or as we have seen before, they have to lose their self. We should get used to seeing the history of vocal music as a history of how jouissance sneaks into our ears: “The entire history of opera [...] can be analyzed as a function of this process. With each period an equilibrium point is reached according to its own modality. Each mode of the operatic genre achieves in its own way the compromise between institutions and apparatuses that generate vocal jouissance and those who come to regulate it. That is why the problem of musical jouissance can find itself cast in moral or ethical terms. [...] Only in this light can we understand why those debates are so violent and why religious bodies and, more generally, social regulatory bodies sometimes bring all their weight to bear in an often absurdly rigorous effort to regulate something so apparently secondary as singing and music”¹²⁹.

¹²⁶ Poizat 1992, p. 150.

¹²⁷ Serena Guarracino, *La Primadonna All’Opera* (Trento: Tangram Edizioni Scientifiche 2010) p. 85. My translation.

¹²⁸ Guarracino 2010, p. 85. My translation.

¹²⁹ Poizat 1992, p. 45.

CHAPTER 5

WORDS AND VOICES

5.1 WORD OF GOD VERSUS CRY OF ECSTASY

There is a clear sacred undertone to the *querelles* that sprung up among opera lovers and haters; such disputes are drenched in the need, akin to that of religion, to regulate the (perceived) socially dangerous sensual pleasure that listeners enjoyed while listening to singers, as if for first time music could wreak such powerful havoc in their deep-seated souls that their rational selves were at stake: Michel Poizat quotes Marie Antoinette writing to her sister Marie Christine on the 26th of April 1774: “They can speak of nothing else, every head is filled with the most extraordinary excitement you can imagine, it is incredible: the divisions, the attacks, you would think it was a religious matter”¹³⁰. (...) Poizat goes on to remark that it was indeed a religious matter “insofar as religion and morality have to do with the regulation of *jouissance*”¹³¹. The Christian tradition itself has, of course, traditionally used sound and music as instruments of worship¹³²; although we take it for granted, it is worth to spend some attention on this issue: why do the faithful use sound and music? Does God appreciate it? What is God’s sound, if it has one? Philosopher and theologian John Hull, upon becoming blind, has talked about the relationship between sound and the divine as Steven Connor reports: “Sound is more readily associated with the transcendent, because sound ‘suggests that over which we have no power’ (TR 126)¹³³. He [John Hull] then suggests that this is why religions often speak of the invisibility of the divine principle, but hardly ever of his/her inaudibility: ‘When we say that the divine being is invisible, we mean that we do not have power over it. To say that the divine is inaudible, however, would be to claim that it had no power over us’.”¹³⁴. The faithful call up to God via sacred music because they expect an answer; he¹³⁵ will certainly hear them and send a sign. But

¹³⁰ Private letter quoted in Poizat 1992, p. 5.

¹³¹ Ibid.

¹³² This was never, though, a straightforward matter, as I shall discuss later in this chapter.

¹³³ Steven Connor here quotes from John M. Hull, *Touching the Rock – An Experience Of Blindness* (London: SPCK 1990) p. 126 and indicates his source as “(TR 126)”.

¹³⁴ Connor 2000, p. 24.

¹³⁵ So far I have used to neutral pronoun “it” to describe an abstract godhead; however, I will

will this sign be in the language of music? Or will God directly speak to his faithful in intelligible words? What is the relationship between God and language, God and *lógos*, God and music? Most of all - does music infallibly evoke a divine connection?

Of course in the Bible God speaks, and he is said to create the universe through his Word: “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God and *the Word was God*”¹³⁶, where the original Greek term for “Word” is “*lógos*”: not simply a word as a unit of language but a signifier of rationality, logical rightness, moral righteousness and paternalistic wisdom. Therefore, the right music to please such a God must be a music that follows the rule of the *lógos*, for only then it can be deemed “sacred”; that is to say, a music in which words are clearly spoken; “make sure the word maintains the upper hand”¹³⁷, otherwise a dangerous, feminine jouissance effect might creep between the notes. According to the rules created during the Council of Trent, “polyphonic music was permitted in addition to the use of traditional chant *as long as the texts of polyphonic pieces were not unduly obscured*”¹³⁸, and the ruling was that there should be one tone for one syllable, so that the meaning of the word of God would be communicated clearly; the Council also forbade “those musical works in which something lascivious or impure is mixed with organ music or singing”¹³⁹. It must be noticed that the fear of wordless music and the attachment to the *lógos* were not just born with Christianity but were already witnessed in the works of Plato and Aristotle, as Mladen Dolar points out – however, it is Augustine of Hippo who sounds most perturbed by the guilty pleasure of listening to music, rather than to the words it carries: “When I remember the tears I shed at the Psalmody of Thy Church (...) I acknowledge the great use of this institution. Thus I fluctuate between peril of pleasure, and approved wholesomeness (...) Yet when it befalls me *to be more moved with the voice than the words sung*, I confess to have sinned penally, and then had rather not hear music”¹⁴⁰.

What happens when word and voice separate? Does the voice automatically become an instrument of the devil, or does it rather turn to a liquid, slippery state,

use “he” for the Christian God as that is the way he is usually considered.

¹³⁶ John 1:1. My italics.

¹³⁷ Dolar 1996, p. 21.

¹³⁸ <http://www.liturgica.com/html/litWLTrent.jsp>. My italics.

¹³⁹ Council of Trent, Session XXII: *Decretum de observandis et evitandis in celebratione Missae*, in http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/pius_xii/encyclicals/documents/hf_p-xii_enc_25121955_musicae-sacrae_en.html

¹⁴⁰ Augustine, *Confessions*, book 10, 33 in Dolar 1996, p. 20. My italics.

glowing with an intrinsic ambiguity that is considered ever scarier? Despite the Church's efforts to moralise and regiment the voice, there is actually a grey area where wordless sound (it is probably better not to call it "music" at this stage) exists and still retains a sacred allure, and that is mystical ecstasy. I have already spoken about the mystics' impossibility to utter words in Chapter 3: Catherine Clément mentioned their being "forbidden to articulate"¹⁴¹ while Teresa of Avila was blessed and cursed with "loud cries which she cannot stifle"¹⁴²; at this point it is interesting to recall Michel Poizat's thoughts about mysticism and music: "Here we touch [...] the articulation between vocal jouissance and worship, between vocal jouissance and the relation of the human to the divine, between lyric and mystical ecstasy. The relation of the Catholic Church to mysticism was as fraught with ambiguity as was its relation to music, and for similar reasons. Mysticism, like music, was both valued and distrusted. The fear of excess, of unleashing mystical ecstasy, is ever present, and at one time or another all the great mystics have been suspected of Satanism: every mystic had to prove the divine origin of his or her trance"¹⁴³. In fact, every type of loss of self is inherently ambiguous and disquieting as it stems from the extremely intense and not necessarily positive emotions I have investigated in the first part of this work; it is no surprise that the Church, an institution that claims to derive its authority from the Word, could be suspicious of a theoretically well-intentioned spiritual activity based on the irrational, the liminal, the unspeakable and wordless. "For what is beyond the word announces both the supreme elevation and the vilest damnation. What raises our souls to God makes God ambiguous; beyond the word one cannot tell God from the devil. The voice is boundless, warrantless, and, no coincidence, on the side of woman"¹⁴⁴. But this view is born exactly from a fundamental faithfulness to the *lógos*, to a male, bearded, speaking God: an idea of God that was surely successful in terms of monotheistic proselytism and indoctrination, but that overloads the divine being with too many particular attributes to let it be an all-encompassing, absolute principle.

The groundbreaking otherness of the idea of God proposed by mystics resides in conceiving God as too big to be even talked about rationally; a God that can only be

¹⁴¹ Clément, Kristeva 2001, p. 59.

¹⁴² Teresa Of Avila 1921, p. 81.

¹⁴³ Poizat 1992, p. 47.

¹⁴⁴ Dolar 1996, p. 23.

reached by intuition, not by reasoning, and can only be praised by means of sound, not words, through what Connor calls “the ecstasy or arson of vocalic space constituted by the cry”¹⁴⁵. Furthermore, and again calling on women to step on the proscenium and perform a sacred hymn of wordlessness, Dolar explains how “Some mystical currents proposed an astonishing reversal of this massive paradigm: music is the only appropriate way to God since it is aiming precisely at a God beyond the word. It is a way to a limitless and ineffable being, a quality that Augustine was already aware of. What is at stake is an enjoyment beyond the signifier, something that opens the perspective of the Lacanian problem of feminine jouissance (which Lacan himself tackled precisely through *the women mystics*; cf. Lacan 1975,70-71)”¹⁴⁶.

¹⁴⁵ Connor 2000, p. 35.

¹⁴⁶ Dolar 1996, p. 22. My italics.

5.2 VOICE AND WOMAN

I believe that an interesting parallel can be traced between the fate of music and of women under Christianity: just like the former needed to be domesticated and carefully regulated in order not to become an instrument of sin, the latter had to be coerced into Madonna-like, harmless, sexless paradoxical childbearers in order not to become Eve-like, jouissant sinners. This is why philosophers like Mladen Dolar, as testified by his sentences that I have quoted in the previous chapter, think that wordless music and the cry are so strongly connoted with femininity: while men are comfortable in the realm of *lógos* because they, so to speak, “own” it, women are repressed and chained down to silence¹⁴⁷; this condition of imprisonment paradoxically even impedes them from making use of their own *lógos*¹⁴⁸. So in order to break free from these constraints, and when they finally do break free, it is a cry of freedom that they emit – because no one emits a “speech” of freedom, for climactic reasons. For women, the cry and generally wordless voicing become a symbol and a tool in the struggle against the power of what Guarracino, after Derrida, calls the “phallogocentric system”¹⁴⁹.

The preeminence of women’s voice as preferred instruments for singing becomes evident in the history of opera; the main question is no longer about voice being an instrument of God or of the Devil, but about the female singer being an angel or a demon herself. Such dichotomy was perpetuated and heightened when opera scores started to feature the cry, an irrational rip in the fabric of music, an unpleasant surprise for spoilt and lulled ears. When the cry appears, the soprano’s voice can no longer be purely associated with delightful flurries of melismas – it can also have an anguishing, scary effect; what does that say about the vocal instrument producing it? Once again Michel Poizat informs us of the puzzled reactions to the audience at the dawning of this new vocal effect: “The question of the cry in opera is first addressed explicitly in Mozart [...] where the angel’s voice definitely quits the castrato to be

¹⁴⁷ For examples of the silencing of women in history see various loci in Karpf 2006.

¹⁴⁸ Despite considering *lógos* (as well as monotheism) an undeniably male-centred cultural creation, I do not support the traditional “man = culture, woman = nature” dichotomy and I believe it suggests a mutilated or at best crippled image of women; I find it dismal to see certain superficial strands of New Age-influenced feminism confusing spirituality and instinctiveness with superstition and ignorance on these grounds. A female alternative to *lógos* need not be *illogical*.

¹⁴⁹ Guarracino 2010, p. 32. My translation.

redistributed, quite unequally, between the male tenor to some extent and the female soprano for the most part. Is this what gives Satan a foothold on the opera stage? Is the singing woman then the *diva*, a medium for the angel, or *demonia*, a medium for the devil, or is she both at once?”¹⁵⁰. Here the traditional misogyny brought forward by religious fear goes hand in hand with the musical newness¹⁵¹ and the whole set of emotions that the cry could generate. It could be argued that those opera scores were still written by male composers and reflecting their ideas, which is the reason why Clément, Poizat and Guarracino in their works see the voice of the soprano as a female tool in the hands of a male creator¹⁵², like a puppet that sings what its puppeteer wants it to. Of course this contention is unfair in that it denies any possible agency on the part of the singer and reduces her work to mere “execution”; in addition, it is safe to say that without female voices constantly engaging in those scores, opera music would simply die out. Women’s singing art is indispensable to keep men’s composing art alive, but the typical relationships of power that have existed between genders throughout history have (unsurprisingly) degraded women’s position and heightened men’s.

Since women are more closely related to the realm of wordless instinct than to the *lógos*, it is clear that female voice is also a preferred instrument to represent loss of self, as women are intrinsically closer to this subject; women are not the only ones who can go beyond themselves but they are better at communicating it – thus, wordless female voices are simply the most perfect instrument to do so. It is notable that in modern avant-garde music female vocalists use a vaster array of sounds, their voices are more eclectic and daring than their male counterpart; musicologist Theda Weber-Lucks found that “women prefer working with all the types of nasal, guttural and breathy sounds produced by the breast and especially the head register. With these techniques, women deliver a great variety of additional sound textures, such as trills, staccatos, coup de glottes, and jiggings. They also use vocal whistling tones, a sound quality that is rarely found in men’s repertoire (...) A very large part of the

¹⁵⁰ Poizat 1992, p. 131.

¹⁵¹ Non-notated cries within a score will become more popular later in the 19th century, when the distinction between “wordless singing” per se and “cry” starts to fade progressively. Kundry in Wagner’s *Parsifal* and Lulu in Berg’s opera of the same name are the most famous examples of this.

¹⁵² Similarly, Wagner in *Opera And Drama* (1851) wrote that “music is a woman”, in the sense that its artistic potential needs to be fertilised by male genius to blossom. See <http://users.belgacom.net/wagnerlibrary/prose/wlpr0063.htm>.

sounds used by women have a cantabile quality or consist of vocalisations. One also finds sound gestures such as calls, screams and cries. By contrast, men seem to prefer speech-like articulations as well as onomatopoeic sounds.”¹⁵³ This might depend again on social issues such as the masculinisation of the female voice: Karpf proves how the general pitch of female voice in the West has significantly lowered in the last fifty years as a result, in her opinion, of a collective pressure to sound more assertive and male-like; despite the questionable gender politics behind it, this effort has nevertheless progressively enriched women’s voices with a range of resonances and harmonics they simply did not use in the past. “Men (...) are stigmatized when they speak like women. Women who talk like men gain in status, but men who talk like women risk ridicule”¹⁵⁴. It then seems that the pitch war has backfired on men, who lose out in terms of vocal expressivity and skillset.

Women’s greater versatility at singing, and the cultural toleration of this fact, can also be read as them having a stronger sexual charge – as a corollary to their skepticism towards *lógos*; the act of singing, of opening her mouth wide and engage her core muscles in an intense effort that uncannily resembles one’s *gradus* to orgasm during the sexual act, becomes a path for the singer to discover and hone both the power in her voice box and in her sexuality, as if her mouth was a second vagina. According to Guarracino “opera is the cipher of a continuously mutating identity, in which the throat, one’s own and the diva’s, is the location of jouissance and, at the same time, of a mutating subjectivity (...) the activation of the throat as an identity symbol is closely linked to its sexual nature”¹⁵⁵; analogously, Wayne Koestenbaum talks about the operatic voice as “the furious I-affirming blast of a body that refuses dilution or compromise”¹⁵⁶. The very body of the opera singer plays an important part in validating the concept of the singer, especially the soprano’s, as a sexually strong persona, as her traditionally plump physique “is a signal of uncontrollable urges, of a desire focused on the mouth as a surrogate genitalia”¹⁵⁷. The higher she gets with her voice, the more she is reaching jouissance.

¹⁵³ Theda Weber-Lucks, “Electroacoustic voices in vocal performance art – a gender issue?” in *Organised Sound*, Volume 8, Issue 01, April 2003, p. 61.

¹⁵⁴ Karpf 2006, p. 180.

¹⁵⁵ Guarracino 2010, p. 44. My translation.

¹⁵⁶ Wayne Koestenbaum, “The Queen’s Throat: Or, How To Sing” in *Anglistica* 13.2, 2009, p. 8. At <http://www.anglistica.unior.it>.

¹⁵⁷ Guarracino 2010, p. 85. My translation.

Generally speaking, singing high notes requires physical exertion from the singer; this has two musical consequences: word articulation has to be relinquished, as pronouncing a consonant would require the singer to temporarily close his/her mouth which would impede the sound from coming out; moreover, all different vowels when sung high melt into an undifferentiated, neutral sound. Therefore, singing high entails the defeat of rational language, and is always more akin to emitting a primordial jouissant scream than to *recitar cantando*; “if she wants to sing true, if she wants to sing beautifully, (the singer has) to resign herself to the loss of intelligibility”¹⁵⁸. Since high notes depict a non-mediated likeness of pure desire, it seems clear that the audience must be so emotionally susceptible to *sovracuti* (notes over the staff) and to the eerie highness of whistle register; rightly, both sopranos and castrati who hit those notes with clarity have always been considered more “valuable” in the opera world, also in a monetary sense¹⁵⁹. As the singer opens up her lustful throat, her equally lustful audience craves in aural delight at “the singing of a woman [...] that destroys speech in favour of a purely musical melody that develops little by little until it verges on the cry [...] finally a point is reached when the listener himself is stripped of all possibilities of speech”¹⁶⁰.

Interestingly, both Poizat and Guarracino in their works seem to take it for granted that opera audience is significantly composed by men – again casting the singer in the role of a metaphorical sex worker whose oral skills are used for male pleasure, but I find this position schematic (maybe influenced by Freudianism?) and unconvincing; partly because I have never heard a female singer considering herself in these terms and partly because I have met a large number of women opera aficionados. Moreover, this vision seems to ignore the existence of legions of gay self-professed opera queens, “arguably the largest, most knowledgeable, and most devoted single section of the opera-going public”¹⁶¹ in Mitchell Morris’ words; it is noteworthy that this kind of audience is particularly attracted by those operas “in which great female singers can make the maximum impact – in practical terms, the

¹⁵⁸ Poizat 1992, p. 43.

¹⁵⁹ See Koestenbaum 2009, p. 20.

¹⁶⁰ Poizat 1992, p. 37.

¹⁶¹ Mitchell Morris, “Reading As An Opera Queen” in Ruth Solie, ed., *Musicology And Difference – Gender And Sexuality In Musical Scholarship* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press 1995), p. 184.

bel canto repertory”¹⁶². Even Koestenbaum, whose role as an avid opera lover is firmly rooted in his homosexuality, dispels the old-fashioned “role play” between a male client and a female purveyor of physical bliss by admitting that he, who has no possible sexual attraction for the diva, nonetheless is equally enthralled by listening; opera gives him “an uncanny discomfort that I now call pleasure”¹⁶³: a perfect definition of jouissance in all its glorious complexity.

¹⁶² Morris 1995, p. 190.

¹⁶³ Koestenbaum 2009, p. 7.

5.3 FROM FEMALE VOICES TO GENDERLESS VOICES

Although, as we have seen, it is mostly women who perform the high notes requested by vocal jouissance, it can be argued that such heights actually divest the voice of its gendered characteristics, sometimes even of its basic human timbre; when a soprano performs a *vibrato* in high E-flat her voice becomes pure sound, apparently detached from the body of the performer, persistently vibrating in the air like a matter of fact. The same can be said of many of the sounds used by avant-garde vocalists as listed by Weber-Lucks¹⁶⁴: “sound textures” do not have, and do not *require*, any gender label and can verge freely on the side of noise rather than human voice. Wordless singing can even be seen as a way for the singer to get acquainted with her origin as an animal, as animals don’t speak in a verbal language: “It should be noted in passing that with this question of the cry and the vocal high note, the distinction between humanity and animality collapses. The prelapsarian indifferentiation of the human and the animal comes at the cost of the renunciation of speech: Orpheus communicates with animals through his singing and the angels communicate among themselves without the intermediary of the spoken word”¹⁶⁵. Even whistle register, which I use in *Theogyny*, is so high-pitched and rife of high frequencies that the notes distort and stretch their human quality almost to the point of losing this quality at all, and resembling a bird cry or a siren instead¹⁶⁶.

So far, my analysis of the voice has always regarded a properly trained, female singer as the origin of that voice; however, when I have loosened up this rule and started to look for examples of jouissant sounds in everyday life, I have found that there are other kinds of voice that can go beyond the *lógos* - without necessarily sticking to gender but transcending it. Transcendence itself, or jouissance, or loss of self, these are all universal ideas that can be experienced by both men and women, so why could not the voice that expresses them transcend gender too? “It is difficult to avoid noticing that the spookily genderless voice box has been clothed with a feminine aura. And it is difficult to know what to do with this information (...) Though voice has been described as a duplicate of the vagina, the wily larynx can

¹⁶⁴ See previous chapter.

¹⁶⁵ Poizat 1992, p. 44.

¹⁶⁶ It is evident that these sounds are not favoured by singers whose only aim is to “please” or by an audience who thinks that voice needs to be kept under musical and social control.

embody male and female characteristics, *or neither*. Some voice manuals make the larynx seem a vestige of an extinct, versatile, genderless species”¹⁶⁷, writes Koestenbaum; when he talks about the genderless larynx he might actually have a hidden motive to remove the operatic voice from the tightly policed realm of women in order to bring it closer to the ranks of the gay opera queens I mentioned earlier, in order to obtain a closer identification between vocalist and gay audience; in any case he strikes, so to say, the right note.

Needless to say, the most widespread a-logical, a-gendered sound we can come across is the scream, or the cry. Avant-garde vocalist Diamanda Galás, famous for her high-pitched screeches and deeply influential for my own vocal development, explains the motivations informing her technique by saying that “a scream is the immediate reaction to a trauma, and it should be performed and perceived as such”¹⁶⁸; a condition of extreme physical pain, as I have investigated in chapter 3, leads to loss of self, which of course involves loss of gender-awareness; a scream of pain is a primordial voicing to signal a distress: it is no accident that the Maenads celebrated and symbolically recreated Dionysus’ dismemberment in their festival with screams of “euoi”¹⁶⁹ – a proto-word composed of vowels only, that does not need to be rationally articulated. Comparable to a scream of pain is the cry of a baby, an “in-fans” (literally, “s/he who cannot speak”¹⁷⁰) whose self-awareness has neither reached the idea of gender nor the ability to speak: a “pure manifestation of vocal resonance linked to a state of internal displeasure”¹⁷¹, the baby’s cry is probably the loudest sound produced by a human being; in the very first part of its life, the baby’s voice box is in pristine condition and has not been “marred” by the necessary changes that life will impose of it, like erect posture, word articulation, language learning¹⁷². Therefore sound is free to flow from the voice box in a way that older

¹⁶⁷ Koestenbaum 2009, p. 12. My italics.

¹⁶⁸ Diamanda Galás, public lecture at the Queen Elizabeth Hall, London, 2 August 2012.

¹⁶⁹ Liddell, Scott, Jones 1996, now on line at <http://stephanus.tlg.uci.edu/lsj/#eid=33922&context=lsj&action=from-search>.

¹⁷⁰ See http://www.etymonline.com/index.php?allowed_in_frame=0&search=infans&searchmode=none

¹⁷¹ Poizat 1992, p. 100.

¹⁷² Recent research in neuroscience shows that babies have an innate musicality and absolute pitch which usually gets inhibited as they grow up. See Terry Bossomaier, Allan Snyder, “Absolute Pitch Accessible To Everyone By Turning Off Part Of The Brain?” in *Organised Sound*, Volume 9, Issue 2, August 2004, p. 181-189.

children will not be able to imitate, and adults will not be able to perform. The baby's cry is an alarm call founded on its neediness, but it is also "the form of the baby's sonorous omnipotence"¹⁷³ – in this primal ambivalence resides the peerless expressive power of the baby's cry, pure Ur-sound that refuses to be categorised.

Interestingly, Guarracino writes at length about what she calls "a-sexual" or "trans-sexual" voice, that is the voice of mezzosoprano; in her research, singers like Pauline Viardot (Maria Malibran's younger sister) and Emma Calvé who can master this "middle voice" are the true heirs of the castrati¹⁷⁴, and like them they are bearers of an alternative sexuality: these two mezzosoprani are the first open stalwarts of lesbianism. The former, in particular, is said to "represent the vocal androgyny that jumbles up the interpretation of sexual roles"¹⁷⁵ through a vocal technique that makes her voice uneven and harsh but extremely powerful emotionally¹⁷⁶. Viardot represents sexual and musical transgression, the refusal to comply with the traditional idea of femininity were supposed to fit in; as she shines in the role of Orfeo (as the castrati did before), she paves the way to a plethora of real-life and fictional lesbian singers whose identity, femininity and social role are shaped by the "a-sexual" voice.

As much as gender politics are a fascinating part of these singers' artistic achievements, I am more inclined to see their versatile voices as beacon of modernity. In fact, if we distance ourselves from the world of opera and turn our attention to contemporary avant-garde music, we can see that the techniques and theory of the "a-sexual" voice have now been churned and reshaped into a much more inclusive kind of voice, which I like to call "pansexual". The pansexual voice, as I consider it in this dissertation, covers a range that goes approximately from baritone *tessitura* to soprano (A2 to E6); it incorporates sound frequencies that are generally associated both with male and with female voices, to the point that it is hard for the listener to discern the gender of its owner; the pansexual voice disguises

¹⁷³ Connor 2000, p. 30.

¹⁷⁴ Of course there is a plethora of male vocalists who excel in the use of falsetto and who have carried the art of the castrati to our days (for instance Klaus Nomi or Jimmy Somerville); however, in this part of my analysis I have chosen to focus on female vocalists only. In order to properly examine the voices of modern male falsettisti, an extremely fascinating subject in itself, I would have to stray from the rigorous path I have drawn so far.

¹⁷⁵ Guarracino 2010, p. 103. My translation.

¹⁷⁶ The same ambivalent criticism was often directed against Callas' voice, both idolised and disdained.

its origin by making use of all possible vocal registers and timbres, from distinctively feminine sounds to masculine ones, in order to express the inexpressible, the transcendent and abstract in all its facets; I count Diamanda Galás, Yma Sumac, Sainkho Namchylak among the most famous owners of such voices. I strongly believe that only a pansexual voice can aptly translate in vocalism the themes I have been investigating up to this point: eroticism, jouissance, pain, divinity, self-dissolution; the last part of this dissertation will illustrate how, through my own composition and voice, I have tried to put all this content into music.

CHAPTER 6

A CRY OF (LITTLE) DEATH: *THEOGYNY*

6.1 MY PROGRESS AS A MUSICIAN

Conceiving the idea of pansexual voice and training my voice in order to achieve it allowed me to radically change the compositional style I had used in my songs until that moment. I had already come a long way in terms of vocal development thanks to years of training, but the new techniques I implemented opened a new dimension for my singing and encouraged me to explore deeper and more complex themes, like those I talk about in this work. Linking composition and singing with philosophical and musicological research culminated in the composition of *Theogyny*, the final piece that completes this dissertation; but before expanding on that, I feel I should give more information about the progress I underwent as a musician and a vocalist during my PhD years.

My first encounter with my voice had been frustrating: as a child my voice was constantly criticised as too loud, brash and exuberant; in order to develop my budding musical sense I was trained as a classical pianist throughout my childhood and teenage. I then tried to overcome the fear of my own voice by taking singing lessons in my hometown; those were based on a standard pop music technique that suited neither my timbre nor my musical taste. When I moved to London I took lessons based on a much more suitable technique for my artistic desires¹⁷⁷ and started to compose my own material on my keyboard and laptop¹⁷⁸; composing was an occasion to put my musical culture to a good end. After various aborted attempts to find bandmates I decided to go solo under the stage name of Vera Bremerton.

From the start of my musical career I sought inspiration in the most distorted and violent branches of so-called popular music, in particular metal, industrial and techno; I developed a taste for harsh and aggressive beats and enjoyed layering synthesiser melodic lines to make them clash into prolonged dissonances. I always

¹⁷⁷ Private lessons with vocal coaches Jennifer May, London and Tine Ott, Copenhagen. Individual study on Cathrine Sadolin, *Complete Vocal Technique* (Copenhagen: CVI Publications, 2008) and Gillyanne Kayes, *Singing And The Actor* (London: A & C Black, 2004).

¹⁷⁸ I started by using Reason then moved on to Logic Pro, which is still my favourite AUW.

take great attention in developing unpredictable vocal lines that take different directions and make the song varied and interesting to follow – and harder to perform. I have self-released two albums¹⁷⁹ of electronic experimental songs: *Elemental* (2010) and *Synaptica* (2012), participated in a number of collective projects including a fundraiser for Russian punk group Pussy Riot¹⁸⁰, I regularly perform in the UK and abroad. My live setup is usually very simple, in order to avoid distraction from my voice and persona: I perform alone on stage, dressed in black Goth-fetish clothes¹⁸¹, singing in one (sometimes two) microphone; I use a vocal effects box to create reverb, delay and other effects and play backing tracks through my laptop or iPad. In 2011 I started to explore whistle register¹⁸²; at first I noticed how practicing such high notes affected my nerves giving me a tingling on the skin, muscular spasms, mood swings and sexual arousal¹⁸³, but I have learnt how to master these effects with constant practice.

Generally speaking, my singing style owes, and is frequently compared by my audience to that of Gothic-experimental vocalists Diamanda Galás¹⁸⁴ and Jarboe¹⁸⁵, both sporting a vocal range of more than three octaves and venerated as quasi-godlike figures by their audiences; both artists incarnate the angel/demon dichotomy I mentioned in chapters 7 and 8. Galás's recurring themes since her debut in 1979 include death, AIDS, mental illness, humiliation, genocide and religious bigotry; she uses her voice, from nasal husky contralto to classic soprano to high-pitched screeches, to denounce social indifference towards the plague of AIDS in the 1980s, prejudice against gay people or political injustice. She either performs *a cappella* or accompanies herself at the piano. Her voice, occasionally channeled through an octaphonic speakers system, awakens the listeners' deepest fears; her artistic persona is openly demonic, but the emotional intensity of her performances has a cathartic and jouissant effect on the audience, allowing her to reach the status of divinity

¹⁷⁹ For reference to *Theogyny* and to all my compositions mentioned in this chapter, see the attached DVD.

¹⁸⁰ <http://femalepressure.bandcamp.com/album/pussy-riot-freedom-compilation>

¹⁸¹ See attached DVD.

¹⁸² Also called “vocal flageolet” or “flute register” according to different singing technique methods.

¹⁸³ These effects prompted me to research branches of neuroscience that linked brain activity with singing; in the past chapters I have mentioned various articles that caught my interest, however I lack a proper scientific education and cannot analyse them in depth.

¹⁸⁴ <http://diamandagalas.com/>

¹⁸⁵ <http://www.thelivingjarboe.com/>

through that of demon. On the contrary, former Swans vocalist Jarboe, who works with metal and folk music, is regarded by her fans as a spiritual and sometimes physical healer through her singing. Jarboe's Banshee-like, wailing vocals are haunting, rife with distortion effects applied to a mezzosoprano timbre rich in vibrato that she sometimes moulds into a childish whine. She explores the themes of nature, shamanism, sexual and spiritual awakening. Her stage persona is imbued with eschatological solemnity and leaves the audience in awe and deep admiration; at the same time her sounds are often scary, obsessively delivered in a disturbing, primal way. Thus, albeit starting from a divinity status, she reaches a demonic status.

When performing my repertoire I alternate a low, lugubrious contralto and shrill screeches, and occasionally use whistle register; I have developed a vast range of timbres and resonances in different parts of my body, which enhances my expressivity. My voice has been generally described as disquieting, scary, hypnotic and I think electronic sounds are the best accompaniment it can have. While both Diamanda Galás and Jarboe have, so to say, "chosen a side" in their poetics (the former expressing the tormenting voice of the demonic, the latter expressing the healing voice of the angelic) I find it more interesting to explore the dialectic relationship between the two, rather than embracing one and forsaking the other. This perfectly fits experiences like mystical ecstasy and jouissance, in which the extremes of pleasure and pain seem to blend together. The subjects of my songs, if not strictly autobiographical, draw both from the negative and dramatic sides of the human condition: "New Day" is inspired by the women victims of rape and murder; "Heart Of Nihil" by a state of imprisonment and torture; "Leave Me To Heaven" by lost love) and from positive emotions ("Servitude" and "It Is You That I Adore" talk about love gained; "In The Dark Synapses" celebrates the mind's creative power) and from general states of catharsis ("All Words Useless" describes the end of the world by a purifying fire; "Servitude" describes the exhilaration of a painstakingly sought and newly found love).

6.2 MY PHILOSOPHY, MY MUSIC

When composing a song I always start from the idea of an individual battling against an interior turmoil, but this individual does not need to be always perceived as fundamentally feminine: despite being hugely interested in feminist studies and considering myself a feminist, I cannot say that my lyrics talk only from the perspective of a woman, and I try to make my message as universal as it can be¹⁸⁶. At the same time, though, my experience of being a woman surely seeps in and informs my composition in ways that are not completely clear to me; I accept the idea that artistic creativity works in mysterious ways and that a multitude of different reactions can stem from the same work of art. What is indisputable about the protagonists of my songs is their condition of disquiet, of psychic unbalance both in terms of powerful exhilaration (“It Is You That I Adore”, “Cry Little Sister”, “Interior Castle”), defilement (“Misplaced”, “Leave Me To Heaven”) or despair (“All Words Useless”, “New Day”). Certain works, though, necessarily call for a female and feminist awareness: “Interior Castle” is an account of mystical ecstasy seen from the point of view of Teresa of Avila, through her writings of the same title; “New Day” is dedicated to the many victims of gang rape, domestic violence and murder that grace the titles of our newspapers on a daily basis; *Theogyny*, finally, symbolizes a female body’s quest for divine union through sexual ecstasy.

Loss of self also features prominently in my songs and I have frequently expressed it in voice and sound by gradually “killing off” the main vocal line, drowning it amidst a sea of noise (“Heart Of Nihil”, “Leave Me To Heaven”, “Servitude”), or screams (“All Words Useless”, “In The Dark Synapses”, “Interior Castle”), or abstract, wordless backing vocals (“Misplaced”, “Cry Little Sister”). To explain the reason for this compositional trope I would like to draw a comparison between my songs and two of the principal characters in ancient Greek tragedies¹⁸⁷:

¹⁸⁶ In reality, traditionally women have been requested to sympathise with male, straight points of view in all kinds of narrative, including song lyrics; I think that the male point of view, in general, is taken for granted so much so that it is considered universal even by a female audience. I would like to revert this: there is no reason why a male, straight audience could not consider my female point of view as equally universal.

¹⁸⁷ See Albert Weiner, “The Function Of The Greek Tragic Chorus” in *Theatre Journal*, Vol. 32, No. 2, May 1980 (Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1980), p. 205-212.

the Protagonist and the Chorus¹⁸⁸. The Protagonist is clearly the main character who speaks in the song, recounting his/her drama; alongside the Protagonist there are other voices claiming attention, lurking from inside the sonic carpet and occasionally coming to the surface to be heard, expressing their point of view on the subject of the song, then moving back into their background position. These voices do not have any direct role in the “drama” unfolding in the lyrics, but they act like a support or a commentary to the Protagonist’s situation. In theatrical terms, the Chorus is a cast of “actors in a supporting role” against which the voice of the “star” can stand out; with this idea in mind I composed the little frying noises sprinkled throughout “In The Dark Synapses” or the backing vocal lines emerging suddenly and grotesquely in “Cry Little Sister”. As many studies have argued, the Chorus can be psychoanalytically interpreted as the multiple personalities of one schizoid ego¹⁸⁹, frayed and *dismembered*¹⁹⁰ by the traumatic occurrences of its tragic story. This can also be said of my songs: the Chorus and the Protagonist are both my creations, projections of my self; they tell the same story and participate in the same destiny. In fact, just like the Protagonist of Greek tragedies dies on stage while the Chorus laments his/her death, often in my songs the Protagonist (the main vocal line) ends up dissolving into the Chorus (noise, cries, backing vocals); the individual voice must surrender to its own dismemberment, the Protagonist must surrender to the Chorus so that the song can be complete and come to an end.

Having said that, in *Theogyny* I have implemented a different compositional method: the Protagonist appears here and there in quick flashes on the sonic “stage”, but most of the time the Protagonist bequeaths it completely to the Chorus, exactly in order to be engulfed by the Chorus this happens because the piece is telling a story of self-dissolution. Of course this process does not follow a straight line: even when it has reached a high stage the cracking self occasionally raises its head and tries to regain power. While in my previous songs the dissolution of the singing self was incidental (albeit necessary), in *Theogyny* it is the main subject of the music; this piece describes the gradual descent of the earthly individual into a formless

¹⁸⁸ I will capitalize both words when talking about their role in Greek tragedy to avoid confusion with the meanings they have in everyday language.

¹⁸⁹ See for example Roger Travis, *Allegory And The Tragic Chorus In Sophocle's Oedipus At Colonus* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 1999).

¹⁹⁰ After all, tragedy was born as part of the yearly celebrations in honour of Dionysus.

dimension and the subsequent ascent of the “lost”, transfigured self to the divine and equally formless divine dimension.

Theogyny is the first work in which I explicitly present the theme of *jouissance*, however it has already appeared in my music in the shape of *eros/thanatos*: unsurprisingly, the sound that can most easily represent this liaison is the cry, a sound that *transcends* common language and comfortable pitch in order to push the voice in an extreme region of territory that is rarely trodden on. When talking about death and vocalism in opera, Michel Poizat explains how “*jouissance* resides in the progressive dissolution of meaning under the effect of a logic of musical composition that then escapes the logic of verbal expression”¹⁹¹. Although *sex per se* does not feature prominently in my music, I want to point out how the lyrics to one of my oldest songs, “It Is You That I Adore”, explode in a cry of vocalic pleasure: “My will be undone, thy will spread my legs apart / [...] / Cupio dissolvi to black, ‘cause it’s you that I adore”. Usually I perform this song with a nasal, harsh and slightly distorted timbre; however, the repetitions of the last sentence “It is you that I adore” are sung in an increasingly emotional timbre until they culminate in a high-pitched scream, while in the second stanza the sentence is repeated for the last time in an almost unintelligible growl: two different, pre-linguistic ways to symbolise the apex of the sensual passion. Also, “*Servitude*” is composed of multiple layers of abstract noises and wordless vocalises: the voice starts to sing a quiet drone on C3 then progressively climbs up three octaves using arpeggios in C major and A minor. Although the result sounds harsh and violent, this song was composed as a declaration of love and the wild vocalises are a metaphor of sexual pleasure and joy.

Considering my interest in the mystical side of sexuality, it might seem surprising that I haven’t investigated this subject more broadly in my past compositions: this happened mainly because I feel that the world of contemporary music is already replete with artists pushing their idea of *sexiness* forward, be it for sales reasons or for sincere conviction¹⁹²; I was never interested in being the umpteenth “*sexy*” act, even if it might have won me a bigger audience. In fact, even when I have written songs about love (like “*Leave Me To Heaven*”, “*It Is You That I Adore*” and

¹⁹¹ Poizat 1992, p. 45.

¹⁹² Among countless examples of wordless cries used sensually, P J Harvey’s “*The Dancer*” (1995) stands out as particularly intelligent and ironic. Live performance http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SPS_o2H7Q4A.

“Invisible Hounds” from *Elemental*) my lyrics have always addressed it in an abstract way; the focus is always on the singing “I” as the *subject* of desire, not on the beloved “you” – partly because many of the songs are not inspired by a real person but by a symbolic, fantasised “*obscure object of desire*”.

Finally, from the point of view of vocality, the voice of the dismembered subject cannot be other than a scream of pain¹⁹³. In my own vocal technique I have both tried to reproduce the “natural” human scream that tearing muscle would elicit, both sought to mimetically imitate the sound of limbs being torn apart. The result of the latter is a suffocated, strained and strident sound that makes lyrics less comprehensible but can still be used across my whole vocal range and at both loud and quiet volume. This sound can be heard mostly in “Then All These Curses” (which lyrics are taken from Deuteronomy and describe the punishments inflicted to the man who does not follow God’s path), in “Leave Me To Heaven” to describe brokenhearted suffering, and in *Interior Castle* to describe Teresa of Avila’s occasionally painful ascent towards transcendence; I will also use these sounds in *Theogyny* to signify the individual’s progressive dissolution.

¹⁹³ Apart from the extraordinary case of Fou Tchou Li, whose mouth and jaw appear relaxed in the pictures mentioned in chapter 3.

6.3 NOTABLE COMPOSITIONS: PROGRESS TOWARDS *THEOGYNY*

“In The Dark Synapses”, from my second album *Synaptica*, is the first song where I have used whistle register; it is a metaphorical comparison between the womb, where life is created, and the brain, where ideas are born. At the beginning the listener is presented with quiet “frying” noises¹⁹⁴ plus two synthesiser chords in E minor; the sound of the chords is modified with a fast delay (almost a tremolo) to give an impression of mystery, enclosure, while the busy energy of the frying noises evokes life teeming under a still surface. I then start to build up a sound world through which I want to draw the listener more deeply into the song’s meaning: I add cradling, sensual electronic beats that sound as if they were heard from inside amniotic liquid, then a calm yet disquieting sound reminiscent of a cello. This is the basis on which the singing line can develop. As the song progresses, the tonality changes frequently between keys, making it largely chromatic (as it is often the case with my songs). The instruments seem to delicately carve the shape of the internal space where the lyrics and their meaning can grow in intensity.

The lyrics to the first stanza, that came to my mind as an intuition, read “The dreamlike side of mythmaking / sculpts illusions / behind my blinded eyes”. The first verse in particular illustrates myth as the final product of a process starting with mystical dreamy trance, which is the same feeling evoked both by the accompaniment and by the fluctuating vocal line. However, after this dreamy and trancelike stanza most of the sounds fall silent and leave space for the build-up of a much more violent and strident sonic texture: the chorus of the song is made out of pure noise swathes engulfing wordless, high-pitched, “manic” screams performed in whistle register. By this change in sound I want to signify that the mental state in which myth can be constructed is a mystical trance that starts as quiet and then culminates into screams and noise. In fact the whole piece is a metaphor of sexual intercourse: suggesting an enclosed, generative space through the use of the instrumental sounds I have tried to embody the idea of a vagina, while the screams intend to be representative of sexual ecstasy¹⁹⁵.

¹⁹⁴ All my compositions are created in Logic Pro 9. The sounds and synthesisers I refer to are either found in the software’s Sound Library or are my own “found sounds”. Once I select a sound channel I always modify it through plug-ins and a number of effects.

¹⁹⁵ This metaphoric use of music is by no means unheard of: musical structures, especially

The lyrics in the second stanza seem to acknowledge that the process of “impregnation”/mythopoiesis crowned by the jouissant trance has been successful: “Dura Mater, Arachnoid, Pia Mater¹⁹⁶ / preserve my thoughts / in amniotic formaldehyde”. The three meninges act as a metaphor for the uterus that has now been impregnated with the inception of the primeval myth; another vocal orgasm, another set of whistle register screams, ensues. What is most interesting about this song is that it represents the first instance of the same line of thought that led to this whole dissertation and to *Theogyny*; in fact, if we follow the above interpretation of the lyrics, then myth is a filiation of sexual trance, or of the “jouissance” found in the most powerful orgasm: substituting “myth” with its close relative “God” we find the same theogonic hypothesis I have illustrated in chapter 1.

The first real breakthrough in my compositional history, though, came in autumn 2011 when I applied to the conference “Music And Transcendence”, organized by researcher Férdia Stone-Davis¹⁹⁷ and held in Cambridge on the 27th of November that year. That was the occasion when I wrote *Interior Castle*¹⁹⁸, a real precursor of *Theogyny*. The idea of putting Teresa of Avila’s words into music seemed intuitively fitting; for a long time I had been interested in composing a piece of music inspired by her writings; what I find particularly interesting in Teresa’s work, though, is not simply her mystical *gradus ad Parnassum* but the copious references she makes to her voice and her cries of ecstasy: “Yet the soul thus called by God hears Him well enough—so well, indeed, that sometimes, especially at first, it trembles and even cries out, although it feels no pain”¹⁹⁹. From the start I decided this would be a standalone piece, between 10 and 20 minutes of duration. Since it was not going to be performed in a properly amplified music venue I decided to compose a piece for solo voice, in order not to depend on equipment I would not find in the concert room – also, I found it coherent to express Teresa’s intimate tumult and ecstasy through voice, rather than through an external instrument (a properly trained voice becomes indeed an instrument itself: “For I produce my voice in a way that I do not produce

featuring voice, that gradually build up until the point at which a musical climax is induced have often been thought of as models of sex and orgasm - Wagner's “Liebestod” from *Tristan und Isolde* being a supreme example of this.

¹⁹⁶ These are the names of the three meninges, the semi-liquid membranes that wrap and protect the brain.

¹⁹⁷ www.ferdiastone-davis.com

¹⁹⁸ Available on compilation Vv. Aa., *Divine Penetrations I*, Het Donkse Oog, DP008

¹⁹⁹ Teresa of Avila 1921, p. 97.

these other attributes”²⁰⁰; yet even the most solidly trained voice still retains a degree of unpredictability and instinctiveness).

I started by reading Teresa’s book, a lengthy compendium full of advice for young nuns who are willing to tread on the path of mysticism, and selecting excerpts that sounded particularly meaningful; only in a few cases I had to slightly rephrase them in order to make the text flow better. I then decided to compose the music to the piece in Phrygian mode, partly because it gave the mysterious and solemn atmosphere such a text requires, and as a broad homage to Teresa’s country of origin, as Phrygian is especially used in Spanish folk music like flamenco²⁰¹. At first I was daunted by the difficulty of writing a melody that could stand firm without the aid of an external accompaniment; by using various vocal colours and digital effects I solved part of the problem and kept the whole piece constantly changing and interesting to follow; apart from composing fresh material I also used melodic sentences from old unreleased songs that happened to be already in Phrygian mode - others I modified.

To convey the idea of an individual being torn apart by the path towards ecstasy I decided to record a number of vocal channels in LogicPro, each with a different set of digital plug-ins to give different effects. The voices appear one at a time as Teresa is going through different states of self-dissolution, heightened sensory awareness, hallucination, which she describes in detail; then they return with increasing intensity as her soul gets more acquainted with the mystical experience and closer to obtain ecstasy. Rather than simply focusing on the sensual sides of her ecstasy (a theme already analysed by artists, starting with Gian Lorenzo Bernini’s famous sculpture *Transverberazione Di Santa Teresa*²⁰²) I have privileged lyrics that highlight the dramatic changes in her body and her ability to speak, such as “He takes away the power of speech [...] no word can be uttered [...] sometimes she’s deprived of all her senses”²⁰³; as we have seen in previous chapters, in extreme states of excitement we go back to our animal roots, we meet the primordial and we lose the ability to articulate the *lógos*. In Teresa’s case, this state “increases the anguish to such a

²⁰⁰ Connor 2000, p. 3.

²⁰¹ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Phrygian_dominant_scale

²⁰² White marble and bronze, made in 1647-1652, exposed in the church of Santa Maria della Vittoria, Rome: a playful, serene angel penetrates an ecstatic Teresa at heart level with a golden arrow. Her expression is wildly sensual, her eyes are half-closed and her neck tilted backwards; her whole body seems to be in throes.

²⁰³ Teresa of Avila 1921, p. 115.

degree that the sufferer gives vent to *loud cries which she cannot stifle*, however patient and accustomed to pain she may be”²⁰⁴ and “All the joints are dislocated so that the suffering is too severe for the person to have the strength to hold a pen [...] I believe that the health becomes permanently enfeebled in consequence, nor do I think the person would feel it were she *torn to pieces*”²⁰⁵ – once again, when selecting Teresa’s words I had already anticipated two of the main themes of this dissertation, that is dismemberment and the cry.

After mystical ecstasy had been so thoroughly described by Teresa in words, I felt it was time to abandon language in order to offer a vocal transposition of her highest transcendence. In the last two minutes of *Interior Castle* all the different vocal channels start to chase each other and finally join together to sing the same song of ecstasy. This *grand finale* of course required me to use whistle register. Notably, the sound modifications I had set for the vocal channels became scarcely distinguishable in whistle register and I had to increase their level to the point of distortion if I wanted to hear them properly; therefore I decided to let them run freely towards the coda. After the première of *Interior Castle* in Cambridge, a few members of the audience were surprised and scared; two ladies who made a point of being deeply religious said they had found it “very respectful”; I still think this is one of the best compliments my work has ever received.

Theogyny expands on some of the tropes of *Interior Castle* such as the use of multiple voice channels, their progressive layering and the use of whistle register at the end to signify the complete dissolution of self. However, a multitude of voices appears from the start to underline how the ego reveals itself as a cluster of different components, which can disengage and scatter like the gears of machinery suddenly exploding. Once again it is Georges Bataille who gathers all the subjects I have talked about in this chapter and rounds them up in a flourish of visionary, expressionist poetry which prepares the reader for the next chapter: “When I solicit gently, in the very heart of anguish, a strange absurdity, an eye opens itself at the summit, in the middle of my skull. This eye which, to contemplate the sun, face to face in its nudity, opens up to it in all its glory, does not arise from my reason: it is a cry which escapes me. For at the moment when the lightning stroke blinds me, I am the flash of a broken life, and this life—anguish and vertigo—opening itself up to an

²⁰⁴ Teresa of Avila 1921, p. 151. My italics.

²⁰⁵ Teresa of Avila 1921, p. 151. My italics.

infinite void, is ruptured and spends itself all at once in this void”²⁰⁶.

²⁰⁶ Georges Bataille, *The Blue Of Noon*, in Stevenson 2003, p. 76.

6.4 THE COMPOSITION OF *THEOGYNY*

What happens to someone's sound-world when they lose their selves? This is the question that inspired *Theogyny* in the first place. By surrendering the self to jouissance we descend into a primordial, undivided (Georges Bataille would say *continuous*) state that represents the resurgence of a different condition of self. The sound of jouissance therefore must be a liminal song that accompanies the listener during the progress between one state and another: the living and the dead, the relaxed and the ecstatic/jouissant. When I started to focus on the themes of eroticism, mysticism and loss of self I immediately knew my work would be a vocal one, in the style of *Interior Castle*, recorded in LogicPro and tweaked through electronic plug-ins (reverb, modulation, flanger, distortion, overdrive, tremolo); but rather than scattering different voices at different times in the vocal score, this time I realized that the subject of the piece would require me to use vocal polyphony in a continuous flow of sound in order to better represent the process of falling into ecstasy.

The name *Theogyny* came to my mind earlier on in the compositional process; at first I feared it sounded too irrational and self-indulgent like the branches of feminism I do not sympathise with²⁰⁷, then I realised it was simply coherent with the subject of the music so I decided to keep it and allow the music itself to dispel any suspicion of New Age influence. The theoretical basis of the piece suggests that this piece should be cyclical, partly as a metaphor of the Nietzschean idea of Eternal Return and the Schopenhauerian cycle of samsara I have spoken about in chapter 5; and partly because, as I have explained in the same chapter, mystical union is doomed to an end: God does not exist, it is a mythical invention spurted out of mankind's orgasmic imagination, therefore an individual searching for God cannot really find it and their search can never reach a proper finish point. The union with God can only be invented in the individual, but s/he cannot continuously live in a divine dimension, s/he has to come down just like s/he does after sexual jouissance. I then chose to make this piece last between 10 and 15 minutes, to be repeated

²⁰⁷ See note 146, p. 40.

cyclically three²⁰⁸ times. Each time, the timbre each vocal channel would be modified through different plug-ins.

My plan changed significantly after my supervisor Bennett Hogg encouraged me to make use of “plunderphonics”, a technique coined by composer John Oswald²⁰⁹: this musical patchwork involves taking excerpts from older material and re-stitching them together, reworking one’s own work for one’s own ends. In my case, reusing old songs and showing how they developed into my PhD final piece, would mean to create a “narrative” of these songs, from their birth to their ultimate use. So I started to map out the song excerpts I can use for *Theogyny*, I select a sort of “best of” the musical phrases I have ever written, and then put them in order. Sometimes this process involved changing the original key that the melody was written in, but I refused to change musical modes and was always fully open to welcome dissonance in the texture of the work: apart from being consistent with my usual musical aesthetics, dissonance also fits the occasionally excruciating trip of the body and the soul towards ecstasy.

Of course, working on previous songs posed the question of lyrics: I asked myself if I should use those already associated with the melodies I was plundering or if I should compose a new text altogether. But since *Theogyny* was to mirror such an extreme experience like a mystical orgasm, I soon decided to discard human language at all. Proper lyrics in English (or in any other language) wouldn’t allow the piece to flow and would distract the listener; moreover, the use of language would represent masculine *lógos*, and nothing could be more distant from the sound-world of the jouissance. At first I thought of inventing a new language (for example the one used by Chiara Guidi and Scott Gibbons in their work *The Cryonic Chants*²¹⁰); this would solve the aforementioned problem and would also be coherent with the fact that I myself often experience “speaking in tongues” during jouissance. Then again, I decided I did not want to focus on learning a new language and memorise lyrics, albeit makeshift ones. Instead, I decided to practice each melodic line through wordless voicing and see which vowel, which timbre would give the best effect. As I progressed in picking material for *Theogyny*, the work grew longer and more complex; I realised that I had to discard the idea of performing it thrice in a cycle, on

²⁰⁸ An overview on the sacred use of number three: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Triple_deity.

²⁰⁹ See www.plunderphonics.com/xhtml/xplunder.html.

²¹⁰ See www.youtube.com/watch?v=QMZCiYsxvDI.

the contrary its growing intensity would shine better if it were experienced only once. This posed a problem as I had already given a philosophical foundation to its being cyclic; I solved this issue by adding a very quiet line of sound, created splicing tiny samples of my breath and looping it for the whole duration of the piece as a substrate where the rest of the music would grow, blossom and die out. This stratification of sound is a metaphor for the cycle of life and it effectively indicates that the experience described by *Theogyny* ends in order to restart.

The process of selecting material involved choosing the most effective musical phrases I have ever composed (most of the lines I selected happened to be taken from song choruses) and understanding at which point in the composition they should appear; in order to keep the progression of the piece I decided to compose “filling” lines when needed. Also, I did not limit myself to transposing proper vocal lines from these songs, but also accompaniment lines that were originally played by digital instruments and found a new use as vocal lines as well. Accompaniment lines proved extremely useful in those parts of the score when the music needed to decrease in intensity and volume; when the music subsequently increased and had to reach an apex, I would add more layers of musical lines culminating with the one that originally belonged to the vocals. Thus I created an undulating movement in the score, an alternation of energetic peaks and relative relaxation, which I find very faithful to the progress towards *jouissance* that *Theogyny* is narrating (based on Teresa’s accounts and on my own experience); the progress culminates naturally in a coda made of screams and whistles that cover the two extremes of my whole vocal range, instead of only focusing on the high extreme as in *Interior Castle*.

The process I have described was developed in one LogicPro project in which every vocal line was temporarily performed by a synthesiser; every song used was coded in a different colour; the new additional tracks created to complement old material were also colour-coded. The main task of composing *Theogyny* meant factually placing “tiles” of coloured musical lines (each of these “tiles” being a short melody sung repeatedly, as in a loop), in the right place, taking into consideration that the technical difficulty and the pitch of the vocals would have to increase and decrease in waves but follow a progressive path. The score finally develops into a 16-channels, 25 minutes composition divided in four sections (derived by four “plundered” original songs) and a coda made of very high screams in whistle register and very low growling; in the coda, all four sections are repeated at the same time,

then the singing dissolves into a series of abstract vocal noise. This progression and final coda represent the stages the individual goes through before reaching mystical orgasm.

In spring 2013 I recorded all the vocal channels; I trained my voice in order to tackle all the technical difficulties and to perform both pleasant singing sounds and disquieting, *Maenad-like* cries and wails. Part of the recording took place at my own home studio, but the most extreme sounds were recorded at the University with the help of technician David De La Haye who provided me with a number of different microphones; we experimented various types of resonances and timbres. I then created a new LogicPro project where I substituted the synthesiser sound “tiles” with the recorded vocals and added the scream coda. I tried to add a “beats” track to the resulting score by sampling glottal attack sounds but this did not work and fragmented the flow of the music; I also laid out the plug-ins I intended to use from the start, tried them out at length, but once again I did not like the result and decided to leave the 16 voices as naked and rough as they could be: the only effect I added was a slight reverb, which enhanced the ritual feel of the music.

6.5 THE PERFORMANCE OF *THEOGYNY*

While going through the compositional process described in the last chapter, I also started to think of a different way to present my music in a live context; composing a polyphonic score meant that I would not be able to sing it live in its entirety and I would necessarily have to rely on recorded sound. Often sound artists, including some whose work I deeply admire²¹¹, use loop stations to live-sample their vocals provide themselves with a basis on which they can progressively layer more melodic lines; although the results can be very evocative, I do not endorse this practice because I think it restricts harmonic complexity and hinders creativity, forbidding the performer to change time signature, pace and key as s/he pleases.

I thought I would rather give each vocal line a dedicated channel and explore the expressive potential of multi-speaker systems: in her book *The Shit Of God*, Diamanda Galás recalls the “manipulation of sonic spatial coordinates and trajectories through the use of four to five microphones distributed through a quadrophonic sound system”²¹² she used in her early performances, while composer Barry Truax states that “multiples of those eight speakers, particularly if positioned at different heights, can create a three-dimensional sense of space and volume. If independent (i.e. uncorrelated) sounds are fed to specific loudspeakers, sound sources appear highly localised, and, with computer-assisted diffusion, sounds can also appear to move in trajectories around the space”²¹³. So I started to imagine a 16-speaker system for *Theogyny*: on the one hand, 16 vocal channels seem to me adequate to achieve the expressive power I require; on the other hand, in practical terms, the number 16 would allow me, if necessary, to group the vocal channels together in an octaphonic or quadraphonic system in order to be performed. Luckily, Newcastle University had exactly sixteen speakers to lend me for the première of *Theogyny*.

²¹¹ In 2012, Hungarian black metal vocalist Attila Csihar, whose cavernous growl features in the work of bands like Mayhem, Sunn O))) and Current 93, has performed his work *A Scrying* standing behind a table on which an array of loop stations, delays, reverbs and other effects was laid. He vocalised into a number of microphones and live-sampled his vocals. The table he performed on was scattered with candles to achieve a solemn effect. See [youtube.com/watch?v=5NplXeBa7Ns](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5NplXeBa7Ns).

²¹² Diamanda Galás, *The Shit Of God* (London: High Risk 1996), p. 3.

²¹³ Barry Truax, “Sound, Listening And Place: The Aesthetic Dilemma” in *Organised Sound* Volume 17, Issue 3, December 2012, p. 197.

At first I pictured the speakers as being placed in a circle or in two lines; in that period, though, I had started investigating for the philosophical part of this dissertation: in particular, I had been fascinated by the function that the amygdala²¹⁴, a tiny component of the limbic system that commands fear, aggressiveness and “drive”, plays in mystical experiences²¹⁵. Upon remembering that the word “amygdala” means “almond” in Greek²¹⁶, I immediately associated it with the “vesica piscis”²¹⁷, the almond-like shape in which Christ is often pictured (hence the Italian name “Cristo in mandorla”); the almond shape is also reminiscent of the shape of a slit, as in artist Lucio Fontana’s paintings²¹⁸ – and of course of the vagina, and even of the shape of vocal folds when in use: “Voice commentators describe the larynx as labial – based on visual analogy, and on the association between women and invisible things”²¹⁹.

There seemed to be a consistent and solid conceptual relationship between neurosciences, God, sacred art and sex, and all these elements needed to find a space in the performance setting of *Theogyny*, not only in its music; I found a satisfactory solution by deciding to place the 16 speakers in the shape of an almond of around 6 metres of length, to direct the sound towards the centre, and to pan the vocal lines based on bass at the far ends of the almond and those based on trebles at the close sides. By enclosing the music in a clearly defined, vagina-like space I wanted to create a *témenos*, a piece of land cut off from its surroundings and devoted to sacred activities²²⁰. My position would be at the centre of the *témenos* as a self-appointed “priestess” officiating the ritual of *Theogyny*, building up the “imaginary soundscape”²²¹ of a woman’s self dissolving into mystical orgasm: that is, practically, controlling and manipulating the volume, panning and frequencies of the 16 vocal channels.

²¹⁴ See a simple definition at en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Amygdala.

²¹⁵ Stephan B. Hamann, Timothy D. Ely, John M. Hoffman, Clinton D. Kilts, “Ecstasy And Agony: Activation Of The Human Amygdala In Positive And Negative Emotion”, in *Psychological Science*, Volume 13, No. 2, March 2002, pp. 135-141.

²¹⁶ www.tlg.uci.edu/ljsj/#eid=5839&context=lsj&action=hw-list-click.

²¹⁷ See innumerable examples in Italian Medieval art. Also, en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Vesica_piscis.

²¹⁸ See www.tate.org.uk/artists/lucio-fontana-1102.

²¹⁹ Koestenbaum 2001, p. 12.

²²⁰ www.stephanus.tlg.uci.edu/ljsj/#eid=105955&context=lsj&action=from.search. The root of this word, the Greek verb “*témno*”, to cut, is the same of the Latin “*templum*”, hence the English “temple”.

²²¹ Truax 2012, p. 197.

With invaluable help from technicians David De La Haye and Fred Hollingsworth I have succeeded to première *Theogyny* at Newcastle University on December 13th, 2013, in a recital room, in front of an audience of my two supervisors and their students. I was sitting in front of a table with two laptops (from which I could control the vocal channels, 8 channels per laptop) and a heap of mixers, interfaces and wires spreading out to reach the 16 speakers, carefully laid out in the closest to an amygdala shape that the room allowed. I insisted that the audience was free to walk within the *témenos* and choose their favourite vantage listening point; they could sit, lie, dance, in total freedom. If I had performed the work in a suitable venue, I would have liked to push the volume at the extreme and possibly get close to the effect described by Don Ihde: “At the extremes of amplification where the quasi-mystical trance of pain-sound occur, it becomes almost literal that one hears more with the body than with the ears (head)”²²²; however, even in the recital room the audience seemed sincerely moved by *Theogyny* and their participation seemed very intense. Unfortunately I did not have the chance to stay longer at the University after the performance, but I felt I achieved a great result as a composer and showcased my full vocal potential.

²²² Don Ihde, *Listening and voice. Phenomenologies Of Sound* (New York, NY: State University Of New York, 2007), p. 231

CONCLUSION

This dissertation has attempted to bring to the forefront and to give a new perspective on the relationship between sex, spirituality and music. Researching this relationship has given me the opportunity to deepen and systematise a current of thought encompassing many subjects I had been fascinated by for a long time: I have endeavoured to eschew commonplaces about the eternal battle of religion vs. sex and have focused on the work of great (atheist) thinkers of the past; I have examined the role of women's voice in expressing the interlacing themes of sexuality and spirituality through the history of vocal music and sought to prove how women, despite the everlasting social constraints tying them down, are actually the most appropriate subjects to become vessels of vocal *jouissance*. It could be argued that maybe it is exactly because of those constraints that women have a special kinship with *jouissance*; on the other hand, it could also be argued that those constraints were put in place in order to keep women away from it.

As a musician I had the opportunity to compose a large scale work which I would have never been able to conceive nor to perform alone; because of its "plundering" nature, composing *Theogyny* was an occasion for me as a musician to reflect about my aesthetics, my musical style, the progress I have made since I first started to write music and how I could possibly evolve compositionally in the future. Surely, after *Theogyny* I felt the need to revise some of the topoi of my music and to try and develop a different style (still pretty undefined, as of now; though I am inclined to simply let my creative instinct sail me to unexpected shores). As a vocalist I now realise that using my whole range of sounds is not only consistent with my aesthetics, but also with my philosophical convictions.

As I wrote in the Introduction, the subject to this dissertation required patience and trust. At the same time, both my research and my writing processes led me to tread on unfamiliar territories I only briefly investigated, but would have liked to explore further. Even in the above paragraph I am laying the foundations of a new, exciting dilemma: did female oppression stem from women's penchant for *jouissance* or vice versa? Writing this dissertation I had to face several similar questions arising in my mind, and had to decide up to which point they would be relevant to the main subject. Given the nebulous nature of some of the ideas examined, I was often dangerously

tempted to take my dissertation for long theoretical detours across different “ancillary” disciplines in order to strengthen my arguments. However, I also realised that if I wanted to communicate my original points neatly and effectively I had to resist the temptation to stray and I had to keep focusing on the final destination of this intellectual journey – on *Theogyny*, that is. In the end, the urgency I felt to reach the end of this *gradus* (as I called this work in the Introduction) gave me the resolve not to indulge and not to fray the dissertation in a delta of rivulets. In other words, I had to put reins and blinkers on my written work to ensure that it would walk on with a steady, straight gait.

These are the branches I sought temporary help from: I have talked about neurosciences and neural experiments in relation to mysticism in Chapter 2.3 and have showed my fascination with the function of the amygdala in Chapter 6.5 whilst devising a suitable performance for *Theogyny*; I have traced the history of the spoken word back to the Old Testament and have researched documents about the Catholic Church and the musical legislation of the Council of Trent in Chapter 5; I have mentioned Odin in the Introduction, Osiris in Chapter 2.2 and Buddhism in Chapter 3. Moreover, Chapters 5.2 and 5.3 have borrowed their discussion on the relationship between the gay/lesbian community and opera from gender studies. My hope is to be able to investigate some of these subjects more in depth in the future on a post-doctoral scheme. Of course, another reason why I decided to stop these detours before they became different journeys altogether is that my cultural background simply would not allow me to research them further - as I clearly stated in the notes, I am not a neuroscientist nor a specialist in world religions.

As much as I think that this dissertation and this composition are a remarkable intellectual and artistic achievement for me, I would also like to stress the fact that the *emotions* elicited by reading these pages or by listening to *Theogyny* have equal dignity and importance. On the whole, with this work (both in writing and in music) I have tried to prove that the frequently shunned condition of loss of self, whether caused by pain, pleasure or a beyond-human experience, or all at the same time, can be a positive and creative state. Moreover, I believe that reading the human condition through the lenses of *anánke* and of the Eternal Return helps making sense of human instincts, such as sex and sadomasochism, we usually find morbid and ambiguous; they also shed a new light on mankind’s everlasting desire to go beyond itself. Reaching out for jouissance, for God, or even simply for better musicianship, are all

sides of the same strife for an indistinct, mysterious “more”. Despite that fact that “real life” seems to try its hardest to quash this potential in each one of us, I still believe it is a moral duty, even a political one, to try and expand it to full capacity. The will to reach for what lies beyond us (in a vocalist’s terms, the will to discover a wider range of sounds) is an act of respect for our nature.

For these reasons I tend to see my work as optimistic and uplifting, as an invitation for the reader to embrace those aspects of “human-ness” that are usually kept hidden. The very idea that this whole dissertation stems from, that is the theogonic hypothesis I have described in Chapter 1, is imbued with humanism and with trust in the faculties of the human brain: philosophy, sex, music are all different ways for the mind to create our own God. As I mentioned in the Introduction, during this research I myself had to undergo psychological training in order to accept the experiences that my brain, my body and my voice were undeniably offering me; this process involved handing myself over (and losing myself) to certain obscure regions of the psyche that I had never investigated before. There is no reason why such experiences could not be studied further, repeated and enriched by people who are inspired by my dissertation or by *Theogyny*; I will be grateful to those who will venture in this field. *Ad majora.*

APPENDIX

MUSICAL EVIDENCE OVERVIEW

My musical practice was an extremely significant means by which I have encountered, experimented with, worked through, and realised the key issues I have talked about in this dissertation, which are exemplified in *Theogyny*. Here is a short overview of my works to date, to be found on the DVD I am attaching to this dissertation.

Elemental (2010) is my first self-released CD; I completed it shortly before starting this PhD. For both these reasons I consider it a starting point in my career. As much as I think that my skills in songwriting, singing and sound producing have improved in time, I still regard *Elemental* as very significant material. The front cover portrait by Ian Ferris is meant to signify something crafty and sophisticated (myself dressed in a tight corset) springing out of rough wilderness; the Goth-industrial aesthetics are not very specific yet at this stage but I already show the direction in which my work was headed, mainly meaning an interest in dark imagery and in compositions that avoid the classic “stanza-chorus” song scheme. The song “All Words Useless” was inspired by an anguishing dream I had and by long night bus trips towards my workplace. “Leave Me To Heaven” is a love song divided into two parts, the first one meek and reflective, the second one aggressive and solemn; I decided that the second part should start very abruptly, regardless of the exact beat count, and this gave me a sense of freedom. “It Is You That I Adore” is less dissonant than the other songs on this album; it has a menacing tone and allows me to use a harsher voice timbre as well as growling spoken word. “Then All These Curses” was conceived by producer Francis Booth with lyrics from Deuteronomy, 28 (transl. William Tyndale); I am only an executor in this piece but I especially like the strenuous, painful vocal timbre and the wide range that I am using. “Misplaced” works on too many different keys and for this reason is probably the least effective song in the album: while I wanted to achieve harmonic dissonance, I find that the guitar and the vocal line contrast too harshly with each other and sound out of tune; this song also features a central section which is more regular harmonically and is made up of wordless sound “tiles” (short melodies sung repeatedly), a technique that

allows me to showcase my whole vocal range and to layer different kinds of timbre with a dramatic *crescendo* effect; I will employ this technique in *Theogyny* as I explain in Chapter 6.4. “Invisible Hounds” is a showcase of my different voice timbres and my electric guitar playing.

Interior Castle (2011): I have already talked about this composition at length in Chapter 6. I have been thinking of releasing this work on its own, although length and its style do not match any of the songs I have written. As of now, it is only available on compilation *Divine Penetrations I* (see Note 193, p. 57). The prospective cover image for this composition is a portrait of me taken by photographer Seventh Sin; in this portrait, the photographer used a sooty, dark palette and captured me while in an approximate “crucifix” pose, with my head tilted backwards in an ecstatic expression, dressed in a rough black fabric and having a rope across my chest.

Synaptica (2012) is my second self-released CD and my first venture in a more freeform musical style where I don’t make use of electric guitar but focus on synthesisers and on making a more intense use of my voice; the songs are more abstract and often feature incoherent lyrics and wordless screams. I decided from the start that the cover to this album should not be a portrait but should mirror the abstractness of the music. The image I chose resembles an intricate system of nerve endings inside the brain, which I find very consistent with the theme of the songs in the album; in reality, it is a red-filtered picture of barren plane trees I have taken in my local park. “Heart Of Nihil” is an aggressive, violent, semi-improvised vocal rant interrupted by a distorted piano melody; it shows how more confident I am in using darker timbres and vocal effects. “Cry Little Sister” is a cover of the song by Gerard McMann and Michael Mainieri featured in the 1987 film *The Lost Boys* by Joel Schumacher; it was commissioned by Italian horror cinema webzine I 400 Calci and was published in their online charity compilation *Fight Night*²²³. This is my only cover version so far; I chose not to change the structure or the tempo but to discard all vocal melody, make chords more dissonant and add a hard, martial beat to it: the result is disquieting and scary. “In The Dark Synapses” is a song I have already described in detail in Chapter 6. “Servitude” takes its name from the Logic Pro synthesiser I used to start the piece; it was inspired by an electrical storm I witnessed

²²³ <http://www.i400calci.com/fightnight2010/download.htm>

in my hometown and again does not feature proper lyrics but a continuous distorted vocalise.

*In The Dark Synapses*²²⁴ (2013) also exists in the form of a music video directed by Maya Alice Art, which I decided to have made to promote my work. I gave the director various suggestions in terms of atmosphere and imagery, to which I think she responded competently and respectfully; in the video I appear wearing different costumes and jewellery, all typical of the gothic-fetish subculture, suggesting that the source of the flageolet screams I have previously described is actually an otherworldly, mythical creature. The video also contains some implied nudity. I am happy with the final result although, from a strictly cinematographic point of view, I would have preferred a less hectic, more linear editing and a more sombre colour palette.

*Amoris Vulnus (The Wound Of Love)*²²⁵ (2013) is a techno-rhythm'n'noise concept album that addresses the pain and terror of a rape victim. It marks the debut of a side project that is a big departure, musically speaking, from my vocal compositions; thus, this project required a different name and I called it Viy after a horror novella by Russian writer Nikolai Gogol²²⁶. For me, this project represents an outlet for my harshest, most aggressive musical ideas and for my feminist agenda. Its aim is to introduce an uncompromising and stark female element in the world of electronic music without being ghettoised. Viy wants to denounce the indifference and hypocrisy the issue of sexual violence is treated with by the media, religion, politics and the public by means of multiple layers of techno beats, noise drones, vocal samples of high-pitched screams and wails taken from some of my songs. Since Viy's music is more rigid (rhythmically and melodically) than that of my main act, I only use black and white pictures to promote it; also, as is often the case with techno acts, there is much less emphasis on my physical persona and the imagery is more abstract.

*What Happened?*²²⁷ (2014) is a video by Maya Alice Art featuring my soundtrack and my acting. This work is not a musical video for a pre-existing song like *In The Dark Synapses* was: it stems from the director's ideas entirely and I only performed

²²⁴ At <http://vimeo.com/69735018>

²²⁵ <http://soundcloud.com/viy-1>

²²⁶ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Viy_%28story%29

²²⁷ <http://vimeo.com/104243712>

the roles of soundtrack composer and actress. Despite accepting to work on this film out of friendship, I am not very happy with its outcome and I do not think its tone is coherent with the elaborate, Goth-fetish image I have carved for myself so far. In particular I think that props and costumes look amateurish; the cinematography needs colour grading; the shoddy editing has left out a mistake in the last sequence (me inadvertently opening my lips). Overall, I expected this film to look more abstract and experimental. However, I also believe that the musical piece of the same title I have composed for it (another example of plunderphonics, this time taking some material from “Heart of Nihil” and from *Theogyny* itself) effectively reflects the nightmarish, ritual atmosphere that the action is supposed to convey.

Aside from these works, I have also composed other songs which are still unreleased. “New Day” was inspired by the gang rape and murder of Indian student Jyoti Singh Pandey²²⁸; possibly because of its ethically charged subject, I believe that this song is one of the most accomplished and intense I have ever written, rich with bass drones and industrial beats; the chorus contains a wordless section and a technically challenging vocal flourishing. This song has appeared on feminist group Female:Pressure’s charity album *Pussy Riot Freedom Compilation* (see Note 176, p. 50). Finally, my latest composition is a fast-paced, almost post-punk dissonant anthem called “Leash” and is dedicated to all artists who feel compelled (by the same *anánke* I described in Chapter 3) to cultivate their artistic talent against the odds of everyday life; this theme is of course autobiographical. The *engagé* subjects of these new songs and the different influences they are imbued of seem to point at a new direction that my compositional style might take in the future.

As I said in Chapter 6.4, most of the material I selected to compose *Theogyny* came from lines of the choruses of these songs; in order to “lace” them together I also composed connecting lines. A listener who is familiar with my songs might recognise at which point in *Theogyny* a certain song is “quoted”; however, it must be noted that when this composition is experienced through a common, two-speakers system rather than through the original 16-speakers system, inevitably not all the singing lines stand out clearly and at the same volume.

“Being” Vera Bremerton and Viy (the only names by which I am known on social media) has of course helped me to express different musical influences, as well as the

²²⁸ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2012_Delhi_gang_rape

composition of *Theogyny* has led me to face vocal polyphony in a way I had never tried before. As a complete and multi-faceted musician I think it is important to be involved in a variety of projects as long as they can all be gathered under a strongly individual mark; all the evidence presented in the attached DVD represents various ways I have expressed my musical personality and my visual style. Of course I have made choices that I now regret (participating to *What Happened?*) but these are part of an artist's progress and a useful *caveat* for the future; I am convinced that for the sake of my own music, trusting my intuition and refusing compromise are paramount.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Ariés, P. *Western Attitudes Towards Death* (Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1974)
- Attali, J. *Noise – The Political Economy Of Music*, transl. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis, MN: University Of Minnesota Press, 2009)
- Augustine of Hippo, *Confessions*, book 10, 33 in Dolar, M. *A Voice And Nothing More* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2006)
- Bataille, G. *The Absence of Myth*, 60. In Mock 2010
- Bataille, G. *The Blue Of Noon*, in Stevenson, F. W. “Inverted Surfaces: Bataille’s ‘Pineal Eye’ And The Mythopoeitics Of Augury”, in *Concentric: Studies In English Literature And Linguistics*, 29.1 (January 2003)
- Bataille, G. *Eroticism*, transl. Mary Dalwood. (London: Marion Boyars, 1962)
- Bataille, G. *Preface to Madame Edwarda*, in *My Mother, Madame Edwarda And The Dead Man* transl. Austryn Wainhouse (London: Marion Boyars, 1989)
- Bataille, G. *The Tears Of Eros*, transl. Peter Connor (San Francisco, CA: City Lights, 1989)
- Bataille, G. “The Use-Value Of D. A. F. de Sade” in Fred Botting, Scott Wilson (eds.), *The Bataille Reader* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1997)
- Bataille, G. *Visions of Excess: Selected Writings, 1927-1939*, ed. Allan Stoekl, transl. A. Stoekl, Carl R. Lovitt and Donald M. Leslie, Jr. (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1985)
- Bollert, D. W. “The Wonder Of Humanity In Plato’s Dialogues”, in *Kritiké* 4.1, June 2010
- Bossomaier, T., Snyder, A. “Absolute Pitch Accessible To Everyone By Turning Off Part Of The Brain?” in *Organised Sound*, Volume 9, Issue 2, August 2004
- Brozoni, V. *The Empty Sky: A Critical Comparison Between Lucretius And Nietzsche* (Milan: Università degli Studi di Milano, 2003)
- Camus, A. *The Myth Of Sisyphus*, transl. Justin O’Brien (London: Penguin, 2005)
- Clément, C. and Kristeva, J. *The Feminine and the Sacred*, transl. Jane Marie Todd (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2001)
- Clément, C. *Opera Or The Undoing Of Women*, transl. Betsy Wing (Minneapolis, MN: University Of Minnesota Press, 1988)

- Connor, S. *Dumbstruck – A Cultural History Of Ventriloquism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000)
- Council of Trent, Session XXII: *Decretum de observandis et evitandis in celebratione Missae*, in http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/pius_xii/encyclicals/documents/hf_p-xii_enc_25121955_musicae-sacrae_en.html
- Declercq, F. “Lacan’s Concept Of The Real Of Jouissance: Clinical Illustrations And Implications”, in *Psychoanalysis, Culture & Society*, vol. 9. 2004 (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan)
- Dolar, M. *A Voice And Nothing More* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2006)
- Dolar, M. “The Object Voice” in Salecl, R., Žižek, S. eds., *Gaze And Voice As Love Objects* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1996)
- Flynn, M. “The Spiritual Uses Of Pain In Spanish Mysticism”, in *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, vol. 64, No. 2, 1996 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996)
- Galás, D. *The Shit Of God* (London: High Risk, 1996)
- Gallop, J. “Beyond the Jouissance Principle” in *Representations*, No. 7, Summer 1984 (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press)
- Greenblatt, S. *The Swerve – How the World Became Modern* (New York, NY: W. W. Norton & Co., 2012)
- Guarracino, S. *La Primadonna All’Opera* (Trento: Tangram Edizioni Scientifiche, 2010)
- Guéguen, P. G. “The Intimate, the extimate, and Psychoanalytic discourse” in *Jacques Lacan and the other side of Psychoanalysis*, J. Clemens, R. Griggs eds., (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006)
- Hamann, S. B., Ely, T. D., Hoffman, J. M., Kilts, C. D., “Ecstasy And Agony: Activation Of The Human Amygdala In Positive And Negative Emotion”, in *Psychological Science*, Volume 13, No. 2, March 2002
- Heidegger, M. *Being And Time*, transl. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson. (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1962)
- Hegel, G. W. F. *Phenomenology Of Spirit* in Stevenson, F. W. “Inverted Surfaces: Bataille’s ‘Pineal Eye’ And The Mythopoeitics Of Augury”, in *Concentric: Studies In English Literature And Linguistics*, 29.1 (January 2003)
- Hull, J. M. *Touching the Rock – An Experience Of Blindness* (London: SPCK,

- 1990)
- Ihde, D. *Listening and voice. Phenomenologies Of Sound* (New York, NY: State University of New York, 2007)
- John of the Cross, *A Spiritual Canticle Of The Soul And The Bridegroom Christ*, trans. David Lewis (London: Thomas Baker, 1909), now at http://archive.org/stream/spiritualcanticl09john/spiritualcanticl09john_djvu.txt
- Kant, I. *Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and Sublime and other Writings*, transl. Patrick Frierson and Paul Guyer, 2011 (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press)
- Karpf, A. *The Human Voice – The Story Of A Remarkable Talent* (London: Bloomsbury, 2006)
- Kayes, G. *Singing And The Actor* (London: A & C Black, 2004)
- Kerenyi, K. *Dionysos – Archetypal Image Of Indestructible Life*, transl. Ralph Manheim (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1976)
- Kerenyi, K. *Prometheus – Archetypal Image Of Human Existence*, transl. Ralph Manheim (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1963)
- Killing Joke, “Struggle” from *Extremities, Dirt And Various Repressed Emotions* (F.A.D. Records, 1990)
- Kirshner, L. A. “Rethinking Desire: The *Objet Petit A* In Lacanian Theory” in *Journal Of The American Psychoanalytical Association* 53, 2005, p. 85. Also available at <http://apa.sagepub.com/content/53/1/83>
- Koestenbaum, W. “The Queen’s Throat: Or, How To Sing” in *Anglistica* 13.2, 2009 at <http://www.anglistica.unior.it>
- Kott, J. “A Short Treatise On Eroticism” in *The Memory Of The Body: Essays On Theater And Death*, transl. Boleslaw Taborski (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2000)
- Lacan, J. *Le Séminaire, Livre XX: Encore* (Paris: Seuil, 1975)
- Liddell, H. G., Scott, R., H. S. Jones, H. S., *A Greek-English Lexicon*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), now on line at <http://stephanus.tlg.uci.edu/>
- Lucretius Carus, T. *On The Nature Of Things*, transl. William Ellery Leonard, book IV, vv. 11-24. In http://classics.mit.edu/Carus/nature_things.4.iv.html
- Lucretius Carus, T. *On The Nature Of Things*, transl. Ian Johnston (Arlington, VA: Richer Resources Publications, 2010), vv. 1660-1674

- Luyster, R. "Ecstasy, Heroism, And The Monstrous" in *Journal of Nietzsche Studies*, Issue 21, 2001
- Marks, E., de Courtivron, I. eds. *New French Feminisms: An Anthology* (Amherst, MA: Shocken Books, 1980)
- Mock, R. "Visions Of Xs" in Gritzner, K. ed., *Eroticism And Death In Theatre And Performance* (Hatfield: University Of Hertfordshire Press, 2010)
- Morris, M. "Reading As An Opera Queen" in Solie, R. ed., *Musicology And Difference – Gender And Sexuality In Musical Scholarship* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1995)
- Murphy, T. R. "The Role Of Religious And Mystic Experiences In Human Evolution: A Corollary Hypothesis For NeuroTheology", in *NeuroQuantology* Vol. 8, Issue 4, December 2010
- Nietzsche, F. *The Birth Of Tragedy And The Case Of Wagner*, transl. Walter Kaufmann (New York, NY: Vintage Books, 1967)
- Nietzsche, F. *The Will To Power*, transl. Walter Kaufmann and R. J. Hollingdale, Kaufmann, W. ed. (New York, NY: Vintage, 1968)
- Nietzsche, F. *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, transl. R. J. Hollingdale (London: Penguin 1961)
- Pavòn-Cuéllar, D. "Extimacy" in Teo, T. ed., *Encyclopedia Of Critical Psychology* (New York, NY: Springer, 2014)
- Plato, *Symposium*, transl. Christopher Gill, Desmond Lee. (London: Penguin, 2005)
- Poizat, M. *The Angel's Cry. Beyond the Pleasure Principle in Opera*, transl. Arthur Denner (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1992)
- Rilke, R. M. *Duino Elegies* in <http://www.sterneck.net/literatur/rilke-engel/index.php>
- Rowe, D. "The Eternal Return Of The Same: Nietzsche's "Value-free" Revaluation Of All Values", in *Parrhesia*, No. 15, 2012
- Sadolin, C. *Complete Vocal Technique* (Copenhagen: CVI Publications, 2008)
- Sample, I. "Female Orgasm Captured In Series Of Brain Scans", in <http://www.theguardian.com/science/2011/nov/14/female-orgasm-recorded-brain-scans>
- Salecl, R., Žižek, S. eds., *Gaze And Voice As Love Objects* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1996)

- Singh, R. R. *Schopenhauer: A Guide For The Perplexed* (New York, NY: Continuum Books, 2010)
- Stevenson, F. W. "Inverted Surfaces: Bataille's 'Pineal Eye' And The Mythopoietics Of Augury", in *Concentric: Studies In English Literature And Linguistics*, 29.1, January 2003
- Sweedler, M. *The Dismembered Community: Bataille, Blanchot, Leiris and the Remains of Laure*, (Newark, DE: University of Delaware Press, 2009)
- Teresa Of Avila, *The Interior Castle Or The Mansions*, transl. The Benedictines of Stanbrook (Grand Rapids, MI: Christian Classics Ethereal Library, 1921 reprint)
- Father Tesson, *Sexualité, Morale Et Mystique*, in Bataille, G. *Eroticism*, transl. Mary Dalwood. (London: Marion Boyars, 1962)
- Travis, R. *Allegory And The Tragic Chorus In Sophocle's Oedipus At Colonus* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 1999)
- Truax, B. "Sound, Listening And Place: The Aesthetic Dilemma" in *Organised Sound* Volume 17, Issue 3, December 2012
- Vv. Aa., *Divine Penetrations I*, Het Donkse Oog, DP008
- Weber-Lucks, T. "Electroacoustic voices in vocal performance art – a gender issue?" in *Organised Sound*, Volume 8, Issue 01, April 2003
- Weiner, A. "The Function Of The Greek Tragic Chorus" in *Theatre Journal*, Vol. 32, No. 2, May 1980 (Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1980)
- York, J. D. "Flesh And Consciousness: Georges Bataille And The Dionysian", 56, in *Journal for Cultural and Religious Theory* 4.3, August 2003
- Zorn, D. *Heidegger's Philosophy Of Death*, in http://www.yorku.ca/zorn/files/Phil_of_death.pdf

WEBSITES

<http://www.anglistica.unior.it>
<http://apa.sagepub.com/content/53/1/83>
http://archive.org/stream/spiritualcanticl09john/spiritualcanticl09john_djvu.txt
http://classics.mit.edu/Carus/nature_things.4.iv.html
<http://diamandagalas.com/>
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2012_Delhi_gang_rape
<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Amygdala>
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Anselm_Kiefer
<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pelias>
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Phrygian_dominant_scale
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Triple_deity
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Vesica_piscis
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Viy_%28story%29
<http://feastofsaints.com/teresadie.htm>
<http://femalepressure.bandcamp.com/album/pussy-riot-freedom-compilation>
<http://soundcloud.com/verabremerton>
<http://soundcloud.com/viy-1>
<http://stephanus.tlg.uci.edu/ljs/#eid=105955&context=ljs&action=from-search>
<http://stephanus.tlg.uci.edu/ljs/#eid=33922&context=ljs&action=from-search>
<http://stephanus.tlg.uci.edu/ljs/#eid=68352&context=ljs&action=from-search>
<http://users.belgacom.net/wagnerlibrary/prose/wlpr0063.htm>
<http://vimeo.com/104243712>
<http://vimeo.com/69735018>
<http://web.utk.edu/~misty/486lacan.html>
http://whitecube.com/exhibitions/anselm_kiefer_il_mistero_delle_cattedrali_bermondsey_2011/
<http://www.ernestotomasini.com/>
http://www.etymonline.com/index.php?allowed_in_frame=0&search=infans&searchmode=none
<http://www.ferdiastone-davis.com>

<http://www.i400calci.com/fightnight2010/download.htm>
http://www.imdb.com/title/tt1029234/?ref_=sr_1
<http://www.liturgica.com/html/litWLTrent.jsp>
<http://www.plunderphonics.com/xhtml/xplunder.html>
<http://www.sterneck.net/literatur/rilke-engel/index.php>
<http://www.tate.org.uk/artists/lucio-fontana-1102>
<http://www.theguardian.com/science/2011/nov/14/female-orgasm-recorded-brain-scans>
<http://www.thelivingjarboe.com/>
<http://www.tlg.uci.edu/ljsj/#eid=5839&context=lsj&action=hw-list-click>
http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/pius_xii/encyclicals/documents/hf_p-xii_enc_25121955_musicae-sacrae_en.html
<http://www.wellcomecollection.org/press/press-releases/brains-the-mind-as-matter.aspx>
http://www.yorku.ca/zorn/files/Phil_of_death.pdf
http://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=player_embedded&v=5_qn2bOD5fU
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5NplXeBa7Ns>
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QMZCiYsxvDI>
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SANRCgEDP1w>
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SPS_o2H7Q4A