

<https://doi.org/10.18778/2353-6098.6.08>

Monika Szuba

University of Gdańsk

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7923-8174>

e-mail: monika.szuba@ug.edu.pl

“The Ecstasy of the Between-Us”: Sharing the World in Michèle Roberts's Relational Poetics

Abstract

In *Through Vegetal Being*, Luce Irigaray writes about the importance of “cultivating and sharing life between all” as it will result in “the blossoming of all beings.” This perspective seems to reside at the centre of Michèle Roberts's writing. Entangled in the natural world, her characters demonstrate an awareness of the necessity of grounding. Mud, this mixture of water and soil, is a recurrent motif, and a powerful symbol of remaining close to the earth. It also exemplifies the collapse of binaries frequently occurring in Roberts's texts, including the intertwining of human and nonhuman beings particularly present in her poetry. Offering a weave of the spiritual and the worldly, Roberts frequently foregrounds our corporeal existence, which constitutes a major theme in her work. Sensual and fleshly, her texts remain “in the tangle of brambles” (*The Heretic's Feast* 6), immersed in the shivering, shifting, changing world, with all its intensities and sensations.

This essay explores the significance of the vegetal and animal in the constitution of individual identity in Michèle Roberts's poetic work. The analysis will focus on the relation of the self with the world, established in the spirit of cultivating and sharing.

Keywords: Michèle Roberts, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, dehiscence, chiasm, Mitsein, corporeality

Michèle Roberts creates in many genres—fiction, poetry, essay—yet most critics focus on her novels and short stories, ignoring her poetic work. Even though she is recognised mostly for her work in fiction, in effect and in practice poetry has formed part of her writing career since the beginning. When her first novel, *A Piece of the Night*, was published in 1978, she had already had experience as poetry editor (1975–1977) at a radical feminist magazine, *Spare Rib*. A few years later she became poetry editor at *City Lights* (1981–1983). In 1982, she co-authored a volume, *Touch Papers: Three Women Poets*, with Michelene Wandor and Judith Kazantzis. In her two poetry collections, *The Mirror of the Mother* (1986) and *Psyche and the Hurricane* (1991), a selection of which was gathered in *All the Selves I Was: New and Selected Poems* (1995), Roberts recurrently explores the relational nature of existence, with a particular interest in a mother-daughter



Received: 4.06.2018. Revised: 14.11.2021. Accepted: 1.04.2022.

© by the author, licensee University of Lodz – Lodz University Press, Lodz, Poland. This article is an open access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution license CC-BY-NC-ND 4.0 (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>)

relationship, but also, more broadly, in the relation between the subject and the world through sensible transcendence. Two pamphlets, which appeared in a quick succession, *The Heretic's Feast* in 2012 and *The Hunter's House* in 2013, focus again on interrelations, foregrounding corporeality and the sensual realms of the world through abundant vegetal and animal metaphors, the poems remaining close to the earth.

Two decades ago, Roberts was described as “an important, but resolutely marginalized presence on the British literary scene, her work shunted off into the area of programmatic feminist texts” (Luckhurst 243). As Clare Hanson argues, Roberts's feminism plays a significant role in her writing, influencing her fiction (229). Being labelled “a feminist writer” may seem to be a simplistic pigeonholing for an author like Roberts. Her writing is often discussed in the context of feminist and poststructuralist theory, but the author herself denies that her novels are mere explanations of any theoretical texts or paradigms. It is important to note at this point that Roberts's work does not illustrate or follow feminist or other theory but explores the same problems in a fictional or poetic form. As she says in an interview, “There's a certain kind of academic person who thinks that if you are interested in theory, then a novel is somehow just an illustration of a theory, and I don't feel that. I feel like I'm working together with it” (“On Women” 96). This is an important confession in the light of what this chapter proposes. During my discussion, I shall employ theoretical and philosophical concepts; yet in doing this, I do not wish to suggest that Roberts's poetry *follows* philosophy or theory but that it *moves along* with it, it co-exists, offering creative insights which are impossible to access for philosophers and theoreticians. Roberts's writing is, for want of a better phrase, “theoretical,” that is to say, concerned with exploring philosophical questions through poetic form. For that reason, I wish to attempt a reading of selected poems in the context of Maurice Merleau-Ponty's, Luce Irigaray's, and Hélène Cixous's philosophies as these approaches bear a particular relation to Roberts's writing in which sensual, corporeal relation with the world is frequently foregrounded and the styles of which are imbued with sensory richness. Thus, the discussion will focus on the relation of the self with the world, established in the spirit of cultivating and sharing, and concerned with concepts of being-with, hospitality, and givenness. I wish to focus mainly on the poems from *The Hunter's House* and *The Heretic's Feast* and argue that these collections continue some of the recurrent preoccupations in Roberts's work, while also constituting a new departure in terms of themes, motifs, and imagery, and bringing in more boldly images of the intertwining with the world. Before turning to the poems, I would like to introduce briefly the theoretical framework, explaining phenomenological concepts employed by Merleau-Ponty such as flesh, dehiscence, the chiasm and the intertwining.¹

Through the Flesh of the World

“The body is the vehicle of being in the world and, for a living being, having a body means being united with a definite milieu, merging with certain projects, and being perpetually engaged therein” (*Phenomenology* 84), writes Maurice Merleau-Ponty, for whom Being is a dialogic relationship of the embodied subject with the world, the former corporeally, sensorially, entangled in the latter. In an ontology of the intertwining, or the chiasm, Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology is an exploration of an embodied intersubjectivity, an incarnate life whereby the body orients the

¹ I employ some of the concepts presented here in the discussion on the poetry of John Burnside, Kathleen Jamie, Robin Robertson and Kenneth White in a book *Contemporary Scottish Poetry and the Natural World* (2019) and in an essay “‘A Pinch of Unseen, Unguarded Dust’: The World and Self in Thomas Hardy's Poems.”

subject in the world through an envelopment in it, our flesh and the flesh of the world, the former self-sensing and the latter sensible, intertwined.

Merleau-Ponty's final, unfinished work, titled *The Visible and the Invisible*, develops his phenomenological concepts focused around the body and its immersion in the world through the senses. Corporeal sensations bridge the gap of alterity as the becoming subject strives to transcend the fragmentation of experience: "The body unites us directly with the things through its own ontogenesis by welding to one another the two outlines of which it is made" (Merleau-Ponty, *Visible* 136), where the two outlines are its sensible nature and openness. The body is a thing among things; it is of things (Merleau-Ponty, *Visible* 137): we are not separate from the world; we are *of* the world, we *are* the world. Everything is interlaced, forming the fabric of the world. The body belongs to the visible, which enables it to see and "open forth" (Merleau-Ponty, *Visible* 154), as seeing is an act of opening. *Offenheit*, or openness, a concept he borrows from Husserl, who employs it to describe our relation to the earth, is the opening of our bodies to the world (Husserl 194–95). For Merleau-Ponty, it is a reciprocal relationship: as we are open to the world, the world is open to us. In order to describe that movement, he introduces the concept of "dehiscence." A term employed in botany, dehiscence means the opening of flower buds or fungi when they are ready to release their content. The spilling that occurs as a result may send the seeds or spores out and into the world. Thus, the body's "coupling with the flesh of the world" enriches the latter, while the act of "floating in Being with another life," of "making itself the outside of its inside and the inside of its outside" (Merleau-Ponty, *Visible* 144) immerses the body in intersubjectivity. Living our creaturely lives, we are open to other beings.

Another concept employed by Merleau-Ponty is flesh, which goes beyond the capacity of language to denote, as there exists "no name in traditional philosophy to designate it" (Merleau-Ponty, *Visible* 139). Flesh is very difficult to define as it is not matter or mind or substance, or a fact (Merleau-Ponty, *Visible* 139). The closest one can get to grasping it is by likening it to an element, in the same sense that we

speak of water, air, earth, and fire, that is, in the sense of a *general thing*, midway between the spatio-temporal individual and the idea, a sort of incarnate principle that brings a style of being wherever there is a fragment of being. The flesh is in this sense an "element of Being." (Merleau-Ponty, *Visible* 139)

Flesh does not begin from a union of body and spirit; for Merleau-Ponty, it signifies an attempt to transcend the dual perception of things, because, as he argues, flesh is not a compound of two substances (Merleau-Ponty, *Visible* 140). Its essential, defining quality is reversibility, "a reversibility of the seeing and the visible, of the touching and the touched" (Merleau-Ponty, *Visible* 147), which suggests that the flesh of the world returns to itself (Merleau-Ponty, *Visible* 146). The reversibility of the visible and the tangible occurs for we see and are seen, we touch and are touched, which results in a creation of "an intercorporeal being" (Merleau-Ponty, *Visible* 143). Reversibility means a doubling as speaking entails listening, seeing—being seen, perceiving—being perceived, and touching—being touched (Merleau-Ponty, *Visible* 264).

In the final completed chapter of *The Visible and the Invisible*, entitled "The Intertwining—the Chiasm" (130–55), Merleau-Ponty develops the concept of chiasm, which, together with flesh, constitutes the theoretical foundation of this study. The French word *chiasme* comes from the Greek *khiasmos*, which means "a crosswise arrangement." Thus, flesh turns back on itself, it crosses and merges the "flesh of the world" and the "flesh of the body," blending them into the "sensible" and the "self-sensing" ("sentient") (Merleau-Ponty, *Visible* 250). In his working notes, Merleau-Ponty writes, "Grasp this chiasm, this reversal. That is the mind" (*Visible* 199). The

chiasmic intertwining takes place when the seer and the seen merge to become “one sole explosion of Being” (Merleau-Ponty, *Visible* 265), but neither loses its inherent qualities. The interweaving may exist in all orders of Being; yet we may gain access to this realisation through poetic expression which materialises, or bodies-forth, this communion in a verbal form, in poetry.

The phenomenal and material body is at the centre in the work of French feminist thinkers, particularly in Luce Irigaray's and H el ene Cixous's work. In her manifesto, “The Laugh of the Medusa,” Cixous underlines the importance of writing for women in order to express their selves in their own voices: “Woman must write her self” (875). Stating simply, “women are body” (886), Cixous emphasises a corporeal, sensual dimension of female experience. “Write your self. Your body must be heard,” she urges (880). Writing through the body, the self creates a new language as a radical renewal of speech lies at the bottom of *parler femme*. Similarly to Cixous, Irigaray urges women to renew language:

We must also find, find anew, invent the words, the sentences that speak the most archaic and most contemporary relationship with the body of the mother, with our bodies, the sentences that translate the bond between her body, ours, and that of our daughters. We have to discover a language [*langage*] which does not replace the bodily encounter, as paternal language [*langue*] attempts to do, but which can go along with it, words which do not bar the corporeal, but which speak corporeal. (“Bodily Encounter” 420)

In the above passage, Irigaray emphasises the necessity to retrieve language which will remain close to the body. Both Cixous and Irigaray insist on writing through the body, which is self-sensing and reversible and thus results in the creation of “an intercorporeal being,” to use Merleau-Ponty's expression again. To use words “which speak corporeal” is to inhabit the maternal relation of the co-belonging. This approach proposes a “feminine metaphysics” (Colebrook 137) whereby the body is not negated or excluded but is at the centre of a subject's experience of the world.

Being-in-the-World

The importance of grounding in Mich le Roberts's poetry is demonstrated in the insistence on sensual aspects of Being, highlighting our intertwining with the flesh of the world. In her poetry, Roberts foregrounds the significance of being that is embodied in the sensible world, where body is place. A corporeal existence is frequently emphasised by references to non-human animals. In her poems, the work is not just of illuminating and revealing the intertwinement between self and world. There is also a movement of reciprocal enfolding, and with that a sense of reverence, a remembering of the ghosts of the natural world. The subject is often being taken out of the house and back into the world or returns from the world to the house. Thus, the work of the poems is to remind the subject of the intertwining, and to bring her closer in touch with this aspect of being. Another aspect of this double chiasmic motion of fluidity is the frequent, interchangeable use of the “I” and “you,” suggestive of a parallel intertwining, an immersion in the shivering, shifting world, with all its intensities and sensations, focused on the openness onto the other, “the ecstasy of the between-us” (Irigaray, *In the Beginning* 1). As I shall explore, Roberts proposes a new way of thinking based on a relational poetics, whereby the dehiscent subject transcends itself, emphasising the importance of “being with,” or being “in circuit with others” (Merleau-Ponty, *Nature* 225).

Relations with the mother, the other, and the world are at the centre of Roberts's writing, foregrounding that being in relation constitutes the essence of what is human. Yet the radical otherness of another person cannot be reduced by attempts to categorise as it would destroy the unknowable alterity fundamental to their subjectivity. The other remains radically other, irreducible

and unknowable fully. On the path to a potential transcendental intersubjectivity, the subject must leave one's own world, "or rather to partly open its limits" (Irigaray, *Way of Love* 70), to become dehiscent in—and through—the encounter of the other. Constantly foregrounding the significance of the relational dimension of Being, Roberts focuses on dwelling with others whereby relations which are subject-object oriented yield to a vision of a subject in relation with another subject, in search of the intersubjective communion, or what Irigaray calls "the blossoming of all beings" ("Cultivating" 92). The binary of self and other is abolished for a non-hierarchical co-existence: "To experience this co-belonging implies leaving representative thought and letting oneself go in the co-belonging to Being which already inhabits us, constitutes us, surrounds us. It presupposes, in fact, dwelling 'there where we truly already are'" (Irigaray, *Way of Love* 70).

The first relation is the relationship with the mother, beginning in a complete corporeal entanglement, fundamental in the process of finding a renewed language, as Irigaray suggests and as Roberts demonstrates in her work. It is a psycho-corporeal bond, both physical and psychological, as well as emotional (phenomenological), which for Roberts has been a particularly fertile source as if proving Cixous's claim that "[t]here always remains in woman that force which produces/is produced by the other—in particular, the other woman. In her, matrix, cradler; herself giver as her mother and child; she is her own sister-daughter" (881). Featuring prominently in her work, the figure of the mother in Roberts's writing has been of significant interest to critics (cf. for instance the work of Sarah Falcus, Sonia Villegas-Lopez and Susanne Gruss). According to Gruss, Roberts's "fictional survey of motherhood culminates" in *Flesh and Blood* (1994), demonstrating how "the theoretical impact of French feminism determines both the narrative and the design of the novel" (129). Roberts has also been exploring the maternal in her poetry, from the earliest volumes to the most recent ones.

This pre-verbal, semiotic mother-daughter bond is a recurrent theme in the earlier texts but appears later as well. Roberts addresses it by employing mythical narratives as a framework for speaking the semiotic radical otherness. Such narratives do not destroy alterity, because they become a medium of analogy for which there is otherwise no language and no representation of experience. In her first poetry collection, *The Mirror of the Mother*, this is represented in a series of poems on two mythological female figures, Demeter and Persephone. There are six poems creating the sequence and offering a revision of the Greek myth: "Persephone Descends to the Underworld," "Demeter Grieving," "Persephone Voyages," "Demeter Keeps Going," "Persephone Pays a Visit to Demeter," and "Persephone Gives Birth." Goddess of harvest and fertility, Demeter is cherished for her gift of soil and balmy weather to grow crops. The title of the volume foregrounds the identity-forming role of the mother. In the eponymous poem from *The Heretic's Feast* (3–4), the speaker addresses the mother using a number of religious images ("my saint," "ascending," "the tabernacle," "shrine," "the Book," "manna"). "The sinful girl / starved for a miracle," is waiting for a sign from the figure of a saint into whom she turned her mother. Nothing seems to happen until "fifty years on," during an unremarkable evening at home, the sign arrives. The final stanza brings an epiphany, as the speaker experiences a "transfiguration" when the mother begins "to pour out words" to her: a revelation takes place, a mother-daughter communion occurring through speech. The final two lines ("I catch you on my tongue / and in my hands") evoke once more a religious scene of accepting the wafer during the holy communion, thus endowing the mother with the sacred feminine. And so the daughter partakes in the communion with her mother, whose words become flesh.

In Roberts's work, the flesh of the mother, in the Merleau-Pontyan understanding of the word, constitutes the element of Being, its very essence. The mother-daughter intertwining is so

strong that when it arrives, the mother's death causes an irreconcilable rift in the self. The self/other paradigm is a matrix in the sense that one is always already enfolded in the mother (matrix) as other. Julia Kristeva describes this self/other entanglement which occurs at the earliest stage in development as the semiotic *chora*, where *chora* (or *khôra*), a term borrowed from Plato's *Timaeus*, eludes definition but may signify space, a vessel, matrix, a womb or uterus, in various translations. *Chora* is neither sensible nor intelligible and only becomes form in the coming into being of form. According to Kristeva, during the semiotic, pre-verbal stage, the child does not distinguish his/her self from the mother, or the world, and emotions, sensual perception and needs dominate (25–30). There occurs a distinct lack of boundaries when the self is fully immersed in the real, experiencing the world through two major drives: love and death. This is how Roberts writes about the pain experienced at the thought of the mother's dying moments:

I could think of her being alive. I could think of her being dead. What I could not bear to think of was that moment when she died, was dying, died. When she crossed over from being alive to being dead. I couldn't join the two things up, I couldn't connect them, because at the point where they met and changed into each other was pain, my body caught in a vice, my bones twisted and wrenched, my guts torn apart. I gave birth to her dying. Violently she was pulled out of me. I felt I was dying too. I could hear an animal howling. It was me. ("God's House" 328)

The thought of the mother's dying feels like one's own death, emphasising the experience of an absolute interweaving of selves. When the mother dies, the daughter experiences a shock of identification felt simultaneously, paradoxically, as giving birth and as one's own death. The unthinkability of the event taking place brings—one would like to say breeds, gives birth to, engenders—contradictory emotions.

The figure of "Mother Nature," pervasive in "the so-called Western tradition," where "[t]he mother is seen as the earth substance which must be cultivated and inseminated so that it may bear fruit" (Irigaray, *Elemental Passions* 1) has been undermined by ecofeminist scholars. In Roberts's writing, it is rather an interconnected community of all beings living together than a nourishing motherly presence, once again suggestive of *chora*. The self's entanglement with the vegetal and animal world runs dark and deep in her texts, as there are recurrent scenes of the chiasmic intertwining with the surrounding world. One example would be a description in *The Book of Mrs Noah* of an interfolding with a tree, when Daphne experiences her "mouth . . . full of green sap, of green words" (52), foregrounding a reversible relation whereby the subject interchanges corporeally with the vegetal being. The emblem of poetry—the laurel branch from the tree-Daphne—became appropriated by Apollo, its true story nearly erased, "its forgotten words, trampled in the dust of the male scholars' sentences" (Roberts, *Book* 52). Yet, as Roberts writes, poetry is returned to women authors who are urged to "[p]ut your ear to the trunk and press it to the bark, which is Daphne's book, Daphne's body, and hear her speak" (*Book* 52). Hearing the laurel tree speak, knowing that language is there in the landscape, women may tell their own stories, may tell their selves, as Cixous wants.

Coming from Latin, the word *vegetus* (meaning "vigorous," "enlivened") suggests vitality, a real living presence, and Roberts's scenes of chiasmic intertwining with the vegetal world remind us what it is to be alive, on a biological, environmental, existential and spiritual level. Another such moment is depicted vividly in a passage coming from "God's House," where the speaker remembers a point when through perception she fused with the landscape, becoming one with it:

I lay staring at the gnarled trunk of the vine, the weeds and grasses stirring about its root, the yellow flowers mixed in with them whose name I didn't know. Then it stopped being me looking at the vine,

because I dissolved into it, became it. I left me behind. Human was the same as plant. The corner of the garden, the earth: one great warm breathing body that was all of us, that lived strongly, whose life I felt coursing inside me, sap blood juices of grass. (Roberts 329)

Being close to the ground, the self experiences direct contact with the world when she touches and is touched, sees and is seen. Initiated through vision—as expressed first in “I lay staring” and then in “it stopped being about me looking at the vine”—the experience of the transcendence of “I” ushers in the chiasm when the subject becomes plant. Fully dehiscent, the subject lets go of her self in a moment of the intertwining with the flesh of the world. Knowing the names of the plants becomes unimportant, a mere convention separating human from vegetal. In this moment of the interchange, sap and juices enter the body, filling it, turning into blood and becoming unified as the earth is “one great warm breathing body that was all of us.” The quickening closeness of the vegetal world strengthens the sensual experience of the subject, entering in a communion with the flesh.

Being-With

Our intertwining with other beings is the highest form in which our being-in-the-world, or Heidegger's *Dasein*, and Merleau-Ponty's *être au monde*, may be realised. I wish to argue that Michèle Roberts's poetry is concerned with being-in-the-world as *Mitsein*, being-with, coexisting. *Pace* the late Heidegger, Being often means being in the world of modern technologies. They may remove us from what we perceive and conceptualise as the “natural world,” keeping us in the realm of screens and keyboards, but we take the non-human environment with us. Even if many people lead digitally mediated lives, associations and comparisons with the living world seem inevitable. For instance, the poem titled “Mobile” (Roberts, *Hunter's House* 21) plays on the analogies between teletechnology and birds (and one insect). Holding a phone is “like holding a wren / in the palm of my hand / one finger stroking its feathers.” Texts “chirrup,” “zig- / zagging like swallows,” “the train is an aviary of warbling, ringing tones.” The speaker is “wingless.” As the lover is away, she/he wishes that “the jays and magpies steal” the poems and “rip them up to make nests with.” The accumulation of participles, those non-finite verb forms, emphasises the ceaseless, unending activity, a suspension in the virtual present. Among all those avian analogies, there is one non-bird reference to a cicada producing loud buzzing and clicking noises which can be heard over a kilometre away and amplified into an overpowering hum. The digital cicada in the poem remains silent, as if powerless despite the speaker's longing “for that jump and fizz.”

While “Mobile” relies on parallels with the bird and insect world, the chiasmic relationship with the natural world is more pronounced in other poems. In some, the intertwining is present at the level of imagery. For instance, in “Your Land,” the speaker experiences becoming-animal, feeling like a “happy honeymooning mole” at first, and then “clumsier & shyer than any mole,” her gloved hands “broad spade-paws.” The final lines read: “You release me / a middle-aged Persephone / dirty and sturdy as love” (Roberts, *Hunter's House* 26). Love resembles plants, sturdy, of strong and hardy growth (which brings to mind the phrase “my vegetable love” from Andrew Marvell's poem “To His Coy Mistress”). Continuing down this garden path, Irigaray's “Cultivating and Sharing Life between All” uses the expression “the blossoming of all beings” (92) to indicate the eternal vitality of beings, what Hildegard of Bingen called *viriditas*. As Irigaray argues, “We must start from life again as the only value that can be universally shareable and learn how to cultivate it with the preservation and the blossoming of all beings in mind” (92). The key verb in the above citation, “to cultivate,” suggests care and labour, gardening, growing fruit or vegetables, but also reaching to a more distant proto-Indo-European root, “to inhabit.” In Michèle Roberts's poem, the world is

a thriving, flourishing place abundant in growth, shared by the two people. The world of plants makes it possible for us to breathe, its hospitality redolent of the mother's womb. As Irigaray writes, after she was born, "[i]t was the vegetal world that ensured mothering care with the environment it arranged around me" ("Sharing" 21). The concept of hospitality has been explored by thinkers such as Jacques Derrida, Jean-Luc Marion and Luce Irigaray. The latter argues, "In some cultures, hospitality does not raise any problem. In these cultures, which are generally feminine ones, the world is open, as is life itself. All, men and women, are children of a mother, in particular of the mother as nature. Thus, peace governs, and also hospitality" ("Toward a Mutual Hospitality" 42).

Being-in-the-world entails dwelling, involved in making ourselves at home (Heidegger 148). Houses and homes constitute a recurring motif in Michèle Roberts's poetry. For instance, in "House-Hunting in the Mayenne" (Roberts, *All the Selves* 120), two lovers form a dwelling between them, being a house to one another: "you're my house / as I am yours," the speaker declares. Implicit throughout Roberts's work there is always a *chora* relationship. Through the process of poetic transmutation, the body of the lover becomes a landscape in the phrase "the hillside at your back." Then, the rock of the outside becomes "soft walls of flesh" when in a radical dehiscence to one another, the lovers "open up / rooms of secret words." Similarly, the poem titled "You" (*Hunter's House* 10) evokes images of a dwelling that two lovers make for themselves. In this poem, the houses are made from elements of the natural world. The images of impermanent dwellings take different forms in every stanza, almost all bound to the atmospheric, vegetal and animal worlds. At times the dwelling is transient in its weather-dependence as in "a pavilion / of clouds and mist." At other times it is vegetal, as in an ephemeral "cave of leaves," or creaturely, as in "a den / of fur" or "honeycomb." The first stanza locates the couple "in the shivering forest." All those images are corporeal, save for the one appearing in the fourth, penultimate stanza:

you fold me a paper
shelter, pleated words
packed-pocket tight

which creates a dwelling of language, the effect emphasised by the alliteration and sound effects: plosive consonants "p" and "t" mark a strong rhythm but are contrasted with the liquids "l" and "r." The image in the final stanza evokes the reversal of a birth: "closed as an egg / you pull me inside." This is a house closely bound with the animal world, including wild boar, bees and birds. These images emphasise our creatureliness: the inextricable connection existing between human and non-human animals. The images change, one into another, thanks to enjambments occurring in every line, which, together with the lack of punctuation marks, creates a smooth rhythm, and with that a sense of the dissolution of self/other boundaries, as self and world, and self and other, are revealed as porous. The sense of enfolding and wrapping dominates, suggesting an intimate envelopment. The sense of touch is foregrounded in various textures: from clouds and mist in the first stanza to fur and bristles in the next, to paper pleats in the third, to honeycomb, and skin. As Merleau-Ponty writes after Freud, "To sense is already to be human. To be flesh is already to be human. . . The body asks for something other than the body-thing or than its relations with itself. It is in circuit with others" (*Nature* 225). Life means being in circuit with the other, and the intertwining is emphasised in the final words of Roberts's poem: "our conversation, our smell / our house of skin," where the pronoun "our" foregrounds the entanglement of the speaker with the "you" of the poem. For Irigaray, this interlacing of beings is at the basis of the world, and she calls it "the ecstasy of the between-us" (*In the Beginning* 1). Ecstasy, or a state of rapture, requires one to step outside

oneself, causing a displacement, whereby the subject is put out of place. This moment allows the borders of self to be transcended into an experience of intersubjectivity. The verbs—"lift," "stroke," "fold," "wall," "wrap," "wave," "pull"—represent the second person. Even if the "you" seems to dominate the lines, egalitarianism is maintained in the repetition of the second-person pronoun which matches the number of times—six—the pronouns "my" and "me" appear. Symmetrically, the first-person plural "our" occurs three times in the last lines of the poem. This emphasises the image of "twoness" that Irigaray writes about, "a feminine transcendancy, which is necessary to construct a valid female identity and non-hierarchical loving relationships between the sexes" (Irigaray, *Elemental Passions* 4).

Hauntings

From an intimate dwelling, we are moving now to a haunted house. Roberts's interest in hauntings of many kinds is prominent in her fiction. For instance, the story of *In the Red Kitchen* interweaves female experience, demonstrating a striking convergence which goes beyond time and place, where ghosts and spirits figure together with the displaced, the abandoned, and the forgotten. Hauntings return in Roberts's short stories, for instance, in "Emma Bovary's Ghost" from *Mud: Stories of Sex and Love* (2010), and again, in her 2017 novel, *The Walworth Beauty*. Ontologically undetermined, spectres occupy a third space, straddling the sphere in-between: neither here nor there, neither dead nor alive, offering "*the experience of the undecidable*" (xiv), as Julian Wolfreys argues. By the same token, the definition of spectrality "escapes . . . any positivist or constructivist logic, by emerging between, and yet not as part of, two negations: *neither, nor*" (Wolfreys x). A form of haunting occurs in the writing process as "writing is precisely working (in) the in-between, inspecting the process of the same and of the other without which nothing can live" (Cixous 883).

In "Haunted" (Roberts, *Heretic's Feast* 5–6), the house provides a shelter from the outside world, represented by "owls & bats," against which the "jumpy" speaker locks and shuts it. Yet it soon turns out (in line 4 to be precise) that hauntings do not come in the form of nocturnal birds and flying mammals but in the second person singular, and in the "mouth / distorted, snarling / let me back in." The house is affected by the haunting; chaos and disintegration start to rule:

Next day the washing-machine
broke down
& the china stopper
popped out of the cider
bottle & the Velux
blind would no longer draw
a black veil over
the view from the bedroom window.

The house is giving up the ghost of its artificiality, through the breakdown of the mechanical, and letting in the world, while forcing the subject out into that world, thereby implying a form of chiasm in the crossing of the threshold. The use of the word "stet" in line 24 ("No. Let it sit. *Stet*") introduces a textual reminder, drawing the reader into the house of language, strengthening "an irreducible nexus of language and materiality" (Vasseleu 25). Here a gesture of resistance, *stet* suggests the speaker's wish to return to the previous state of things. In their staccato rhythm, the five one-syllable words aim to bring back order. In the next stanza, the speaker leaves the house to look at the garden. An alliterated expression "cast-off corrugated iron," evoking a heavy piece of hard scrap metal, is contrasted with a swift one-syllable "hare" (6), a reminder of the natural world, which suddenly appears in the

garden, joining the vegetal world there. Both the hare and the garden belong to wilderness, as suggested by the words describing the garden left to run wild, “the tangle of brambles.” The poem demonstrates how the self emerges through an entanglement of the verbal and the material: “As flesh, the interwovenness of language and materiality in perception is embraced as an irreducible complexity that is necessary for a sense of self” (Vasseleu 23). Gradually disintegrating, the dwelling in the poem slowly but inevitably returns to its originary state. At the same time, the house is disturbed; broken apart into plural “homes.” There is something uncanny at work in the return of the nature/subject connection, because they are merely an expression of technology.

Givenness

Adjacent to the house, the garden may become a place of haunting as well. Gardens occupy an important place in Roberts's writing, at times becoming alive through the work of daemons, or demiurges, personified, or entwining with the subject as was discussed above. For instance, in the following passage from “God's House,” the subject experiences an uncanny moment as she enters the garden: “The garden had seemed to know me, had taken me in without fuss. Leaving it, going outside and not coming back, would be like having my skin peeled off. I might die. Something was tearing me apart inside. It frightened me. I was a piece of paper being slowly ripped in two” (327–28). Far from being indifferent, the garden is a knowing presence, recognising and welcoming the subject who feels entangled in its flesh. A similar interlacing occurs in the eponymous poem from *The Hunter's House* (7–8), which is set in the midst of the summer season, as emphasised by vegetal imagery in the first stanza:

Blazing wheel of midsummer:
sweet-peas, poppies, love-in-a-mist.
Crackle of grass mattresses
shrivelled to
yellow stalks and parched earth.

The phrase “blazing wheel” suggests both the disc of the sun and the seasonal cycle. The season is marked by the names of flowers: “sweet-peas, poppies, love-in-a-mist.” The latter is a wonderfully evocative common name for *Nigella damascena*. The employment of the commonly used name (love-in-a-mist goes by many other, undeniably poetic names such as chase-the-devil, devil in the bush, kiss-me-twice-before-I-rise, love-in-a-puzzle, love-in-a-tangle, ragged lady, Bird's nest, blue crown, and blue spiderflower) grounds the poem in the everyday but also in a folkloric netherworld, slightly *unheimlich* and unfamiliar. The poetic self is entangled with the vegetal world, as indicated in the gardening metaphor from the second stanza when the speaker weeds out “lost flowers / out of my heart by the roots.” There is already a sense of passing or folding, as the words “shrivelled” and “parched” indicate aridity. The dead emotions, like stray plants, are uprooted and thrown onto the compost. The third stanza announces an animal presence, a “lodger” who takes an avian form, all power and action as the verbs suggest: “thumps back,” “crash landing,” “scrambles,” “hovers,” “scratch.” He enters the house every night, “his claws and feathers in,” disrupting the inhabitant. His hovering presence is overpowering, as “he rummages about” and installs himself close to the speaker's bed, as his “pinions bristle, scratch, brush / my face in dreams.” The lodger is then called “[m]y companion” and compared to Eros, as an expression of a dark desire. In the last two stanzas the speaker turns directly to the lover, addressing him: “You enter and change me / make me rise.” This is a moment of transformation as the speaker becomes a bird “with concertinaed wings” and a cohabitation of subjects starts. The subject is transported to the hunter's

house, which occupies the outside world: “in your bright palace of stars / your black palace of sky.” The pronoun “you” in the first two lines (“You arrive in August. / You enter and change me”) turns to “me” repeated twice (“You enter and change me / make me rise”), to return in the fourth line with a preposition indicating togetherness (“With you up to the hunter’s house”). The connection between the two lovers is emphasised in the next line (“We jostle”). In an expression of desire, the two are changed into a pair of nocturnal birds of prey. The energy of the attraction to the other transforms the self, and then is transformed into a poem.

Inhabiting the world truly means living with and experiencing its cycles. Seasons are frequently marked in Michèle Roberts’s poems with vegetal references, which emphasise the natural rhythms of the world. For instance, the poem in *The Hunter’s House* titled “Solstice” (17) joins a number of other poems on the solstice, marking a threshold, a transition between seasons. The frequency of references to perennial temporal moments demonstrates how embedded this poetry is in the seasons, focused on a close observation of the changes and the significance of living with them. Another summer poem, titled “Harvest Poem” (Roberts, *Hunter’s House* 9), evokes an image of ripeness and abundance at its wistful end. The opening stanza calls up an image of ripeness with its early autumn signs: “[b]unches of black / muscat grapes,” “[s]weet chestnuts fall,” “apples plump,” “scarred pears.” It is a season tipping towards winter, a time of scarcity and austerity, felt acutely by the speaker who prepares “an elegiac soup” with “the last of the basil, tarragon, beans.” The final lines of the poem further stress the sense of something ending: “I shut and shutter my house / The roses are gone. Your wine is stoppered up.” The gestures of closing and saying farewell to the time of abundance is strengthened by two words “good bye” repeated four times. During the lover’s absence, “[t]he words of letters are not flesh enough. / So the morning glory opens blue / eyes, cries.”

The poem’s rhythm relies on enjambments and occasional rhymes, further foregrounded by the refrain, slightly modified each time, thus performatively expressing the conceptual theme of the natural rhythms of the world. First it is the idiomatic “*ça donne*” repeated three times, which turns into the second person “*tu donnes*,” as if conjugating backwards. The final refrain is “*je veux donner, donner, donner*.” The returning refrain in the form of the conjugation of the verb *donner*, or give: *ça donne*, it gives, and *tu donnes*, you give. The third one differs from the other two in the form: here *donner* is preceded by the verb *vouloir*, to want, thus *je veux donner* I want to give. The present situation in the first two is juxtaposed with a desire to give. As Irigaray writes, desire “is a question of establishing, keeping and cultivating the between-us” (*In the Beginning* 18). Givenness entails dehiscence, an openness taking place on a corporeal, sensual level as “[t]he words of letters are not flesh enough.” The poem’s sensuality is foregrounded by the use of touch and textures (“plump to my palms,” “scarred,” “prickle”) in the first stanza and taste in the second (the ingredients for the elegiac soup, and the reference to “your . . . mouth”). The third stanza of “Harvest Poem” is devoid of sensual elements except for a vision, replete with longing for corporeal experience. The appeal in the final line, “Gather me in,”² expresses a profound yearning and refers to the title of the poem, the speaker aligning herself with the vegetal world. The preposition stresses a yearning to be taken inside, enclosed, in circuit with the other since to love is “to watch-think-see the other in the other” (Cixous 893).

² This brings to mind the use of the noun *recueillement* by Luce Irigaray in *I Love to You*, a word which comes from the verb *recueillir*, meaning “to gather in” or “to collect.” Her translator, Alison Martin, explains in a note that Irigaray suggests “the return into the self, being with the self, and the notion of realization,” adding, “[i]ts meaning may be situated within a Hegelian dialectical process (albeit a non-teleological one), and it draws upon Nietzsche’s return and Heidegger’s *leigen, logos and mitsein*” (41).

At the centre of Roberts's poetry is an intimate being-with with other human and non-human entities in a world established through cultivating and sharing. As they reveal a sensual dimension of experience, her poems underline a corporeal relation with the world which emerges from the images of sensory abundance, thus emphasising the givenness and hospitality of the earth as a house where plant, animal and human cohabit. The poetic self becomes radically, vegetally dehiscent, unfolding in an openness onto the other and creating a plurality of the joined space of "the between-us." Phenomenologically entwined in this manner, the self remains in an intimate envelopment, dynamically apprehending the world in the process of chiasmic intertwining, together forming Merleau-Ponty's "intercorporeal being."

Works Cited

- Cixous, Hélène. "The Laugh of the Medusa." Trans. Keith Cohen and Paula Cohen. *Signs* 1.4 (1976): 875–93. <https://doi.org/10.1086/493306>
- Colebrook, Claire. *Philosophy and Poststructuralist Theory: From Kant to Deleuze*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, 2005. <https://doi.org/10.3366/edinburgh/9780748622276.001.0001>
- Falcus, Sarah. *Michèle Roberts: Myths, Mothers and Memories*. Bern: Lang, 2007.
- Gruss, Susanne. *The Pleasure of the Feminist Text: Reading Michèle Roberts and Angela Carter*. Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2009. <https://doi.org/10.1163/9789042029026>
- Hanson, Clare. "During Mother's Absence: The Fiction of Michèle Roberts." *British Women Writing Fiction*. Ed. Abby H.P. Werlock. Tuscaloosa: U of Alabama P, 2000. 229–47.
- Heidegger, Martin. "Building Dwelling Thinking." *Poetry, Language, Thought*. Trans. Albert Hofstadter. New York: Harper, 2013. 143–59.
- Husserl, Edmund. *Ideas Pertaining to a Pure Phenomenology and to a Phenomenological Philosophy*. Trans. Richard Rojcewicz and André Schuwer. Dordrecht: Kluwer, 1989. <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-94-009-2233-4>
- Irigaray, Luce. "The Bodily Encounter with the Mother." 1987. Trans. David Macey. *Modern Criticism and Theory*. Ed. David Lodge and Nigel Wood. Harlow: Pearson, 2000. 414–24.
- Irigaray, Luce. "Cultivating and Sharing Life between All." *Through Vegetal Being: Two Philosophical Perspectives*. Luce Irigaray and Michael Marder. New York: Columbia UP, 2016. 92–98. <https://doi.org/10.7312/irig17386-017>
- Irigaray, Luce. *Elemental Passions*. Trans. Joanne Collie and Judith Still. London: Routledge, 1992.
- Irigaray, Luce. *In the Beginning, She Was*. London: Bloomsbury, 2013. <https://doi.org/10.5040/9781350251915>
- Irigaray, Luce. "Sharing Universal Breathing." *Through Vegetal Being: Two Philosophical Perspectives*. Luce Irigaray and Michael Marder. New York: Columbia UP, 2016. 21–26. <https://doi.org/10.7312/irig17386-004>
- Irigaray, Luce. "Toward a Mutual Hospitality." *The Conditions of Hospitality: Ethics, Politics, and Aesthetics on the Threshold of the Possible*. Ed. Thomas Claviez. New York: Fordham UP, 2013. 42–54. <https://doi.org/10.1515/9780823292806-004>
- Irigaray, Luce. *The Way of Love*. Trans. Heidi Bostic and Stephen Pluháček. London: Continuum, 2002. <https://doi.org/10.5040/9781350251939>
- Kristeva, Julia. *Revolution of Poetic Language*. Trans. Margaret Waller. New York: Columbia UP, 1984.

- Luckhurst, Ron. "'Impossible Mourning' in Toni Morrison's *Beloved* and Michèle Roberts's *Daughters of the House*." *Critique* 37.4 (1996): 243–60. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00111619.1996.9937891>
- Martin, Alison, translator. *I Love to You: Sketch for a Felicity within History*. By Luce Irigaray. New York: Routledge, 1996.
- Merleau-Ponty, Maurice. *Nature: Course Notes from the Collège de France*. Trans. Robert Vallier. Evanston: Northwestern UP, 2003.
- Merleau-Ponty, Maurice. *Phenomenology of Perception*. Trans. Donald A. Landes. London: Routledge, 1962.
- Merleau-Ponty, Maurice. *The Visible and the Invisible: Followed by Working Notes*. Trans. Alphonso Lingis. Evanston: Northwestern UP, 1968.
- Roberts, Michèle. *All the Selves I Was: New and Selected Poems*. London: Virago, 1995.
- Roberts, Michèle. *The Book of Mrs Noah*. London: Methuen, 1988.
- Roberts, Michèle. "God's House." *Mind Readings: Writers' Journeys Through Mental States*. Ed. Sara Dunn, Blake Morrison, and Michèle Roberts. London: Minerva, 1996. 313–29. <https://doi.org/10.1136/bmj.313.7071.1562a>
- Roberts, Michèle. *The Heretic's Feast*. Kinnerton: Rack, 2012.
- Roberts, Michèle. *The Hunter's House*. Glasgow: Mariscat, 2013.
- Roberts, Michèle. *The Mirror of the Mother*. London: Methuen, 1986.
- Roberts, Michèle. "On Women, Christianity, and History." Interview with Patricia Bastida Rodríguez. *Atlantis* 25.1 (2003): 93–107.
- Vasseleu, Cathryn. *Textures of Light: Vision and Touch in Irigaray, Levinas and Merleau-Ponty*. London: Routledge, 1998.
- Villegas-Lopez, Sonia. "Telling Women's Lives: Vision as Historical Revision in the Work of Michèle Roberts." *Atlantis* 10.1 (2001): 170–88.
- Wolfreys, Julian. *Victorian Hauntings: Spectrality, Gothic, the Uncanny and Literature*. London: Palgrave, 2002. <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-4039-1358-6>