“Poetry [was] both my first love, I guess, and first self — always with the most excruciating blockages”.\(^2\)

“I don’t know if it was depression that drove this muse away or it if was the long rocky strand of her loss that made depression”.\(^3\)

In ‘A Poem is Being Written’, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick declares:

I have spent — wasted — a long time gazing in renewed stupefaction at the stupidity and psychic expense of my failure, during [my teen years], to make the obvious swerve that would have connected my homosexual desire and identification with my need and love, as a woman, of women. The
gesture would have been more a tautology even than a connection. Yet it went and has still gone unmade.4

Sedgwick’s coming out as, to put it crudely, not a lesbian is sand-
wiched in between her description of her deep depression as a teenager and a self-identification that has earned her some praise, lots of scorn, and even more virulent forms of criticism: “In among the many ways I do identify as a woman, the identi-
fication as a gay person is a firmly male one, identification ‘as’ a gay man; and in among its tortuous, and alienating paths are knit the relations, for me, of telling and of knowing.”5 Related to this, she explains, is the fact that, instead of a “will-to-live”, she possesses an “aggressive will-to-narrate and will-to-uncover”. “Un-covering” can mean revealing in an epistemological sense but also to ferret out a secret, lay bare, or, literally, to reveal one’s body, all practices also related to various kinds of (often para-
noid, to use Sedgwick’s term, and extremely productive) know-
ing, and in ‘A Poem is Being Written’, Sedgwick exposes her ass as a site of shame and pleasure, just as she confesses her attachment to other forms of ideological exposure.6

Yet in this narrative of her teenage years, in a passage im-
mediately preceding the sentences I just quoted, Sedgwick also reveals that “the depression [I endured…] I survived through passionate and loving relationships with — have I mentioned this? — women.”7 How are we to understand, though not nec-

5 Sedgwick, Tendencies, 109. Sedgwick critiques the dynamics of interpre-
tive exposure in her later essay, ‘Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading, Or, You’re So Paranoid, You Probably Think This Essay is About You’, in Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003), 123–151. From now on I will refer to this work as ‘Paranoid Reading, Reparative Reading’.
6 “Un-covering” also related to the complex dialectic of knowing/unknow-
ing, the “open secret” that connects sexuality to larger epistemological tra-
essarily reconcile, these moments of (dis)identification—the complex processes by which she simultaneously identifies with female–female desires and as a woman and yet subordinates these affiliations to a story, one might even say a confession, of her identification with gay male subjectivity and with a male–male, adamantly anal, erotics?

‘Who Fed This Muse?’; the poem that inaugurates and frames Fat Art, Thin Art, provides one set of possible answers to this question. It constitutes an exception to most of Sedgwick’s other writings in that it places the speaker’s, who I will assume for the purposes of this essay is Sedgwick’s, relationship with her female muse in a set of queer, female–female homoerotic frames. In examining the work’s form and metaphors, its remaking of the idea of the muse and the genre of her invocation, I will elucidate how the text reveals, even as it withholds Sedgwick’s understanding of the relation between her depression and her poetry: to reiterate the epigraph that frames this essay: “Poetry [was] both my first love, I guess, and first self—always with the most excruciating blockages […] I don’t know if it was depression that drove this muse away or it if was the long rocky strand of her loss that made depression”. Poetry is personified as Sedgwick’s first love and also as (part of) her self: here Sedgwick alludes to an autoerotics of (self)-creation that is inseparable from female–female erotics. In so doing, ‘Who Fed This Muse?’ provides a counterpoint to Sedgwick’s male homoerotic identifications and desires, one that explores the complexities

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9 Without rehashing all the debates about the relation between an author and their writings, let me just say that I am choosing to read this poem biographically, while I realize there may be many other ways of approaching it that challenge this assumption. This is because this essay represents part of a larger project: an experimental, book-length biography of Sedgwick. I see my role in interpreting the poem as one of creating a dialogue between the central concerns, images, metaphors, and formal aspects of the poem and Sedgwick’s own account of her growing up, her relation to writing and to life. At times, however, I also go beyond this frame, interpreting in ways that ignore the limits of the biographical.
10 Sedgwick, A Dialogue on Love, 65.
of female–female intimate relationships as it charts the connections between the muse, the poet, and the worlds through which they travel, both separately and together.

However, this essay does not seek to redeem Sedgwick in the eyes of those critics, who early on found (and to some degree still find) her supposed inattention to lesbians to be a political problem.\(^\text{11}\) I am not going to argue that she was always already or secretly or essentially “really” a lesbian. To do so would be to employ the “hermeneutics of suspicion” that, following Paul Ricœur, Sedgwick wants to challenge.\(^\text{12}\) Instead, I engage Sedgwick’s own proposal that, first and foremost, criticism “think [...] other than dualistically”\(^\text{13}\) and that it replace a “paranoid reading” (based on the impulse to anticipate and expose secret—or poignantly obvious—structures of power and/or knowledge that always already control us) with a “reparative” one.\(^\text{14}\) Sedgwick importantly notes that not all paranoid readings are bad, that, in fact, they are often crucial, but that in their tendency to subsume nuance in order to make “strong” claims (for example, to “insist [...] that everything means one thing”), and to focus solely on negative affect, they rule out other kinds of affective relations to the world and objects and selves within it.\(^\text{15}\) Sedgwick defines reparative reading as “additive and accretive”; “it wants to assemble and confer plenitude on an object that will then have resources to offer an inchoate self”.\(^\text{16}\) She also connects reparative reading to Melanie Klein’s notion of the “depressive position”; in describing the Kleinian distinction between this


\(^{12}\) Sedgwick, ‘Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading’, 124–125.

\(^{13}\) Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling*, 1.

\(^{14}\) Sedgwick, ‘Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading’, 123–151. My essay is part of a larger work that examines Sedgwick’s relation to female–female erotics/lesbianism over the course of her career, as well as other critics’ and activists’ interpretation of this relation.

\(^{15}\) Sedgwick, ‘Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading’, 136.

\(^{16}\) Sedgwick, ‘Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading’, 149–150.
position and the “paranoid” one, Sedgwick highlights the use of the term “position” as providing a kind of flexibility that can distinguish various kinds of critical practices, not theoretical ideologies, of “changing and heterogeneous relational stances”.

‘Who Fed This Muse?’ performs, as it presents a set of “changing and heterogeneous relational stances” between the muse and the poet and, in so doing, produces its own reparative reading of Sedgwick’s relation to women and to the writing of poetry.

‘Who Fed This Muse?’ is not easy to summarize, especially since to describe it in prose risks making it much more linear and narratively cohesive than it actually is. But given the poem’s relative obscurity, the risk is worth taking. The poem details the complex relation between an “I”, putatively Sedgwick, and her muse from the muse’s infancy through the two’s shared childhood and adolescence. At various points the muse deserts the “I”, sometimes for other friends and/or families, sometimes for long periods. The “I” wonders throughout the poem “who fed this muse”, meaning who provided the muse with literal and metaphorical nourishment, especially since, as the “I” remarks, “for years, while she was homeless, I was housed. / Was nourished and gave nurture”. At the end of the poem, the muse and the poet are reunited, and, in a sort of coda, the work ends with an expression of “both our gratitude to those / beloved, who fed this muse”.

This summary fails in many ways, not least of which in its inability to convey the queerness of the relation between the poet and the muse. By queer, I mean not just outside normative heterosexuality (although this is key), but outside normative homosexuality, and outside the norms of familial relationships.

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17 Sedgwick, ‘Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading’, 128.
18 Here I draw upon Sedgwick’s influential set of definitions of the term, especially queer as “the open mesh of possibilities, gaps, overlaps, dissonances and resonances, lapses, and excesses of meaning when the constituent elements of anyone’s gender, of anyone’s sexuality, aren’t made (or can’t be made) to signify monolithically” and queer as “hang[ing] much more radically and explicitly” than “gay” or “lesbian” on a “person’s undertaking.
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For example, in remaking even as it draws upon the classical notion of the muse, the poem, from the very beginning, challenges the traditionally heterosexual “relational stance” between the being that inspires and the one receiving the inspiration. In Greek verse, to put it very simply, poems often begin with the invocation of a muse, personified as female. Ostensibly, this is to glorify the god who, in the form of this muse, provides inspiration to the male poet. An obvious hetero-erotics thus grounds the relationship between the poet and the muse. Moreover, this generic requirement also serves another purpose: it brings glory to the poet by association, as the chosen one whom gods have blessed with the ability to channel the muse. In other words, it is a moment of simultaneous self-abnegation and self-promotion.

From the beginning of ‘Who Fed This Muse?’, Sedgwick plays with this trope, in that the relationship between the muse and the “I” she charts is never stable enough to achieve this vision of poetic power. The muse is never fully subsumed, devoured, or incorporated by the narrator: rarely is she gathered into a “we” with the “I” but, for most of the poem, usually remains separate, and often absent. The identity and identifications of the “I” and her relation to the muse shift dramatically along a continuum (and here my echoing of Adrienne Rich’s famous lesbian continuum is deliberate).

Sedgwick moves loosely for much of the particular, performative acts of experimental self-perception and filiation” (Tendencies, 8–9, emphasis mine).

Sidenote: interestingly enough, although traditionally there were nine muses, Sappho sometimes was referred to as the “tenth”.


In her famous essay, ‘Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence’, Rich posits the idea of the “lesbian continuum”, a term which “include[s] a range — through each woman’s life and throughout history — of woman-identified experience, not simply the fact that a woman has had or consciously desired genital sexual experience with another woman”. She fleshes this out to argue, “As the term lesbian has been held to limiting, clinical association in its patriarchal definition, female friendship and comradeship have been set apart from the erotic, thus limiting the erotic itself. But as we deepen and broaden the range of what we define as lesbian existence, as we
poem within the skin of a jealous sister, but also occupies the place of mother and homoerotic female “friend”.

The locution “friend” recurs frequently in Sedgwick’s autobiographical writings as a sort of placeholder for a set of relations that exist on a spectrum from the usual understanding of the word, to a way to describe someone on whom she has a passionate crush, to someone with whom she has a sexual relationship. In this poem, for example, she refers to “our friend Hal”, an unusual locution for describing one’s husband. Such unmoorings indicate Sedgwick’s refusal to allow the usual trope of the muse to run fully its course, making this not a drama of the poet’s glory but instead one of writer and muse in constant, complex, unstable relation.

Thus, the question that begins the poem focuses not on who nourished the poet (although the unstable relation between the “I” and the muse means we might as well, at least at moments, ask “Who fed Sedgwick?”) but ostensibly on the literal and metaphorical care, epitomized through the literal and metaphorical feeding of another, semi-differentiated entity:

Who fed this muse?
Colicky, premature,
not easy to supply, nor fun to love:
who powdered her behind and gave her food
the years when (“still a child herself almost”)
her mother was too blue?

“Almost”—I was a child.
Blue, I was blue; even more I was green.

delineate a lesbian continuum, we begin to discover the erotic in female terms […].” (Rich, in Henry Abelove, Michele Aina Barale, and David M. Halperin, eds., The Lesbian and Gay Studies Reader [New York: Routledge, 1993], 239–240. Elsewhere in the larger essay of which this piece is a part I discuss some of the drawbacks of this claim. Nonetheless, in its historical context and even to some degree today, it universalizes female–female erotics against the normative assumption of heterosexuality.
Most obviously, it is the poet herself who provides the sustenance. In the first stanza, the “I” identifies as a slightly older child. But who is blue? Is the “I” the mother of both of them, “almost a child herself”, a quasi-narcissistic self-description of the forties child-bride too young and beautiful to be giving birth—young Rita Kosofsky? Is the “I” the mother substitute, forced to step in because the mother suffers post-partum depression? Is the “I” somehow both: a mother/sister who is so close in age to the muse so as to be almost her twin, a mother so “blue” and so “green”, i.e., depressed and envious, she could not care for her?

Rather than not “easy”, this muse is “no […] fun” to love. This substitution recalls the disapprobative declaration, “You’re no fun!”, one child might make to another. Such echoes enforce the sense that the “I” is but herself a “child” with some of the self-centeredness, but also abject dependence, that goes along with youth. Being self-centred then gets redefined in the next few lines of the poem, as the “I” then queers female genitalia and reproduction:

They mystified me too,
the red protuberant
organs hypertrophied with self-abuse
from which we thought back then
a muse like this emerged.

Notice here that suddenly a “we” appears in the poem, just at the moment the work articulates a theory of how “a muse like this emerged”. The phrase “[l]ike this” again distinguishes this muse

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22 Sedgwick’s mother. In A Dialogue on Love (Boston: Beacon, 1999), Sedgwick describes Rita as having an air of “kiddishness”, and her therapist notes that Sedgwick’s “mother seemed to have presented a desired and oft-spoken-about picture of prepubescent girlhood for her father” (78). Such descriptions make the confusion of mother and daughter even more acute.
from the usual one; this is a different kind of muse, a hungry, fussy, unlovable, pleasurable, but sore one.  

The poem also disrupts traditional expectation when it employs the description “red protuberant organs” to represent female genitalia. Traditionally, these are represented, if at all, as hidden, even absent, and serve as a contrast to male genitalia’s flagrant visibility. By contrast, these images invoke the colourful, undeniable presence of the clitoris—but also, as signalled by the plural “organs”, the vagina, or at least its lips. Masturbation, until recently, has traditionally been pitted against reproduction as a wasteful, narcissistic sexual practice. The description of these “organs” as “hypertrophied with self-abuse”—a word whose half-rhyme links “abuse” with “muse”—employs both medicalized language (“hypertrophy” most commonly denotes pathological, “excessive growth”) and the language of moral condemnation that distinguished late-nineteenth and early-twentieth-century discourses against getting off alone.  

This choice reminds the reader that, to some degree, the “we” views these actions as transgressive, outside the bounds of normative sexuality.

A queer female vision of the muse (one who still needs her behind powdered) “emerg[es]”. In ‘A Poem Is Being Written’, Sedgwick describes the more anal erotic—and for her gay-male identified—pleasure she took in enjambment and rhythmic meter, as invocations of, and metaphors for, anal sex and spanking respectively. In ‘Who Fed This Muse?’, we see poetry’s power coming from the solitary, self-centred (and here I use the term in a more positive light—more positive even than Sedg-
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wick’s in the poem), pleasures of masturbation.  

Similarly, in *A Dialogue on Love*, written during the same time period as ‘Who Fed This Muse’, she reports that her own deepest sexual feelings and expression occurred through masturbation coupled with fantasy and, with her therapist’s help, comes to the conclusion that this act of self-care rivals only writing in how it provides a kind of “heldness”. Sedgwick’s poem offers a vision of auto/homoerotic, thoroughly queer (love of self, love of muse, birth of self through birth of muse) reproduction. The poet produces, queerly gives birth to, inspiration, but not the pure lyric of earlier poetry. Yet this birth is not idealized, nor is the genitalia, as it has been in much second-wave lesbian feminist art and writing. Instead, in employing, even as she challenges, terms such as “self-abuse”, Sedgwick displays ambivalence towards this process.

The next stanza continues this ambiguity even as it appears momentarily to stabilize the female lineage with the appearance of a grandmother:

Her grandmother was willing, so I kept her,
lucky I could so choose.
My family fed this muse.

Who is this grandmother? Is it Rita, Sedgwick’s mother, who is “willing” to care for the muse, Sedgwick’s daughter? In this reading, “kept” and “choose” signal the discourse of reproductive freedom: having the “choice” to “keep” the baby. The “I” is thus “lucky” to have the support of her family, and her invocation of the “family” constitutes the first answer to the question

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26 Elsewhere, namely in ‘Jane Austen and the Masturbating Girl’, Sedgwick also explicitly connects masturbation itself to creativity. For more, see *Tendencies*, 109–129.
28 For one famous example, see the work of Judy Chicago.
29 “Or is it Eve’s grandmother, who figures so often, as in Proust, as a figure of tenderest love” (Jason Edwards, personal communication, 1 September 2015).
“Who fed?” that begins the poem. But, was the “I” willing, also? Again, we find ambivalence about the muse and the vocation she represents.

Sedgwick is perhaps, here, deliberately responding to the way other female poets have expressed ambivalence toward their muses. Most notably, Sylvia Plath’s ‘The Disquieting Muses’ (1957) provides an even more specific image of one’s relation to a muse or muses, and of familial relations. ‘The Disquieting Muses’ first stanza reads:

Mother, mother, what ill-bred aunt
Or what disfigured and unsightly
Cousin did you so unwisely keep
Unasked to my christening, that she
Sent these ladies in her stead
With heads like darning-eggs to nod
And nod and nod at foot and head
And at the left side of my crib?

Plath’s muses are terrifying, “[m]outhless, eyeless, with stitched bald head”, but perhaps also resonant to someone like Sedgwick, who is steeped in textile culture. By extension, poetic inspiration, the need to create art, becomes a burden, a curse, and a christening gift brought by wicked “godmothers” from whom Plath’s mother failed to protect her.

Plath belongs to the group of women poets immediately preceding Sedgwick’s generation, and ‘Who Fed This Muse?’ recalls the milieu immediately preceding U.S. feminisms’ second-wave that Plath’s work also invokes, the world from which Sedgwick and her muse emerge. It can be found in the description of the “domestic politics/of postwar” (stanza 11), its complacencies (“nothing could be very different from this or much better”)

(stanza 3), its gender norms and concomitant emergent consumer mass culture (“the Musketeers”) (stanza 3), and its persecutions and violence as illuminated through allusions to the Hollywood 10 and the civil rights movement (stanza 11). A Dialogue on Love provides more details about this context. At one point, Sedgwick shows her therapist a selection of family photos that reflect a similar worldview. Her choice of them, Sedgwick notes, echoes the original intentions behind the snapshots (taken mostly by her father, staged by her mother): the photos are intended to provide evidence of a “handsome, provincial / Jewish family”, to create a set of “tableaux”, for example, Sedgwick and her sister in matching outfits. Pictures of the Kosofsky siblings and their parents reading in various combinations serve as “a chain of testimonials to literacy”, and also art (there is one of “three kids doing blunt-scissored arts and crafts around a table”).

The image of the “blunt [...] scissors” invokes maternal protectiveness and the strictures placed on mothers of this era: they must protect even as they cultivate their children. In A Dialogue on Love, Sedgwick describes her mother as “suffer[ing] from ‘photo face’, the painful dissociated clamp-eyed rictus tugging at the cords / of her neck to make her look / like Nancy Reagan or a tiny Anne Sexton”. The reference to Sexton, with whom Plath is often grouped, invokes again the critique of heterosexual gender norms that characterized both of their works. Moreover, the description of Rita Kosofsky, posing the children in part to present an idealized image of family for the grandparents, also recalls Plath’s description of her own mother. In particular, Plath

31 For more on the Hollywood 10, see also Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, Epistemology of the Closet, 243.
32 Sedgwick, A Dialogue on Love, 18–19.
33 Sedgwick, A Dialogue on Love, 19.
34 If not of every era since the emergence of the idea of white bourgeois motherhood in the nineteenth century.
36 For one notable example of this argument, see Jo Gill, The Cambridge Introduction to Sylvia Plath (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008).
details various ways her mother makes up heroines and embellishes fairy tales with happy endings —

    Mother, who made to order stories
    Of Mixie Blackshort, the heroic bear,
    Mother, whose witches always, always
    Got baked into gingerbread…

— perhaps as a way to cover over post-war terrors such as the fear of nuclear annihilation. But these stories bear no resemblance to, and have no effect upon, the muses who haunt Plath. The mother, like Sedgwick’s, also attempts to provide Plath with the accoutrements expected of successful upper-middle-class girls, such as dancing and piano lessons, at which Plath fails (as does her muse, and as did Sedgwick herself). Yet Plath’s mother never teaches her how to exorcise these muses, “traveling companions” who “stand their vigil in gowns of stone”. In the penultimate stanza, Plath describes her mother ascending

    in bluest air
    On a green balloon bright with a million
    Flowers and bluebirds that never were
    Never, never, found anywhere.

While her mother may be able to deny reality and be buoyed up, literally, by a Technicolor fantasy of superficial complacency that echoes a fifties vision of the perfect woman, Plath must live with the secret of her own grim burden: these muses that terrorize, rather than inspire her. As she puts it, “[N]o frown of mine/ Will betray the company I keep”.

Plath details a queer relation to other women, one outside the normative (nominally Freudian) processes of gender formation in which the daughter learns femininity through her identification with/killing off of the mother. Contrary to this narrative, Plath’s speaker indicts the mother for birthing her into “this

37 Plath, ‘The Disquieting Muses’, 75.
kingdom” but failing to provide her with any example or tools with which to resist the sinister presence and influence of these chilling muses. Poetic inspiration becomes a form of menace.38

In contrast, Sedgwick equates her mother with a more complex version of “imagination”. In A Dialogue on Love, Rita shields her children from “acknowledging […] death, or pain, or systemic injustice […]. All the things we’d learned to be so proud of magicking away, as kids — waving the Rita-conferred wand of ‘ambiguity, imagination’. But while this wand can hide harsh realities, it also privileges “[n]uance/Ambivalence”. These are qualities Sedgwick’s critical work privileges and brilliantly embodies, against “plodding dualisms” such as the ones she describes her mother rejecting.39 In turn, “ambivalence” is the quality that distinguishes Sedgwick’s feelings towards both her mother and her muse in both autobiographical writings and ‘Who Fed This Muse?’ This serves as a contrast to the unequivocal menace Plath’s muses pose and to the equally unequivocal way Plath condemns her mother.40

Sedgwick’s poem, as in Plath’s, never solidifies the “I”’s identification with the muse and/or the mother and vice versa (again, the “I” acts sometimes as mother to the muse), and ‘Who Fed This Muse?’ often represents the estrangement between the two. But Sedgwick’s invocation of nurture offered, withheld, and refused, and the poem’s constantly shifting relation of the position of the “I” vis-à-vis the muse makes it difficult identifying any stable relation of mother, daughter, sister, muse and self, if not impossible. While the beginning of stanza three describes the muse and the “I” in a similar milieu, perhaps sisters or schoolmates, their positioning suddenly turns with the description of a parent–teacher conference, and the voice of the “I” seems to be more of a mother than a sister. That the parent–teacher confer-

38 Again, see Bundtzen’s work on Plath.
40 As Jason Edwards suggests, this may also signal a Kleinian achievement of the depressive position, and thus may display a less agonistic relation to her female predecessor’s than Plath’s (Edwards, personal communication, 1 September 2015).
ence was a potent site of fantasy for Sedgwick, but also a frame for conceiving how she, as parent, and her therapist, as teacher, could discuss a younger Sedgwick’s “resistance to the pedagogies [they were] used to administering”, just emphasizes the ambiguity of this positioning and of the muse’s relation to the “I”.41

The muse turns to teachers, goes with her friends to other “wonder-moms”, rather than to Eve, and most significantly, the muse “refuse[s]” the nourishment provided by the “I” (and again hear the rhyme: this muse is constituted in and through refusal). Instead, the muse is literally and metaphorically fed elsewhere and suffers a hunger so great, and fluctuating so much in size, that the “I” claims the muse had an eating disorder. That Sedgwick herself struggled with “being fat” and came to advocate for a different body politic is something I detail elsewhere in the project of which this chapter is a part. This description of the dramatic variations in girth the muse can undergo in a single day also recalls the title of the collection the poem appears in, *Fat Art, Thin Art*. Moreover, the mention of “one crumb” and overwhelming hunger recall moments in Emily Dickinson’s poetry, where the desire for food often stands in for other unmet, or deliberately denied, desires, including but not limited to erotic ones. Paula Bennett controversially connects images of small items in Dickinson’s poems — beads, seeds, jewels, pearls, dews, pebbles, pellets and yes, crumbs — to the clitoris and to an understanding of “female sexual and creative power” as both “little’ and great at the same time”.42 In particular, Bennett cites the poem that begins, “God gave a Loaf to every Bird — / But just a Crumb — to — Me — / I dare not eat it — tho’ / I starve — / My poignant luxury”.43 Sedgwick is simultaneously invoking and riffing on this reading and on the connections between the dramas of need, refusal, and satisfaction through denial that Dickinson’s poems and the “I” relationship with her muse enact.

The messiness of boundaries between the “I” and the muse comes again to the fore in stanza eight: “Of course, I was in love with her a lot”, although whether the muse can “use” (again note the rhyme) the “I”s love is a question that goes unanswered. Moreover, in this stanza, the confusion of the “I” and the muse is more fully articulated: “By the time she was 12 / I was cemented to my muse’s moods. / Maybe you’d say she didn’t have a self?” At first, this seems to be one version of the muse’s relation to the poet: the muse inhabits the poet and inspires her with her moods, the poet feels taken over by her obsession with the muse, possessed literally by (desire for) her. But it is the muse, not the poet, who lacks “a self”, and the line, “my eyes that dwelt then in her face”, confuses any neat demarcation between the two. At this point in the poem, the muse and the poet are so intertwined that each lacks a separate identity. At the same time, the poem highlights the erotic differences between the two. It is the muse who “court[s]” the femme narrator, doing a “gruff, butch thing” that the “I” “ate up”. Here the muse feeds the “I”.

Yet what does the muse provide? The “I” questions what “taking care” means.

Did I know
how all the grim sublimity
in the tight-budded, clumsy ingénue
could have been called as easily
depression as (what she would call it) speaking true?
Enough to worry: that, yes, I did know.
Worry, the only gift we always gave each other freely.

The poem describes “care” as “all this grim sublimity” that “could have been called as easily / depression”, or what the muse would call “speaking true”. While the half-rhyme embedded in this phrase between “grim” and “sublime” links these two terms,

44 And here again the poem echoes Plath’s description of her life with the muses: they “stand their vigil in gowns of stone”, “[t]heir shadows long in the setting sun / That never brightens or goes down”.

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“grim” denotes both “fierce, cruel, savage or harsh in disposition and action” and, “in weaker senses, daring, determined, bold”, while “sublimity” indicates “nobility or greatness of nature, character, or conduct; moral, spiritual, or intellectual excellence; perfection”. Such a coupling delineates so poignantly the position of the precocious, over-aware teenager. Is depression really just seeing the world for what it is, “speaking true”, the “I” asks. Is depression also the proper relation to the world as it is? Knowing that Sedgwick suffered from depression for much of her life, but also sought the depressive, it is hard not to see this image of the “clumsy ingénue” as referring both to herself and the muse, intertwined and interdependent. Yet the “I” “knows” “[e]nough to ‘worry’” about the consequences of making this equation. And it turns out “worry”, this noun/verb/embodied affect, is something that, in their sometimes rivalrous, sometimes flirtatious, economy of debt and gift, owing and paying, feeding and being fed, she and the muse “g[ive] each other freely”.

In the next stanza, the speaker reflects back on what she implies was a “pleasantness” to their childhood suburb, as distinct from “pleasure”. The alliteration continues with “a cautious plenty” that alludes to a meeting of needs — again the food metaphor reemerges — that, in their naiveté, the “I” and the muse “thought we could assume / — lucky we: almost imagined the world could […]” (emphasis mine). These lines confirm the sheltered existence of their white, middle-class lives, while the locution “lucky we” jars the reader in its slippage from “lucky me”. Such a moment adds resonance to the sarcasm of “lucky” but also, in departing from the usual phrasing, emphasizes again the slippage between the “I” and the muse. Here, one of the few moments in the work they are joined in the first-person plural, they enjoy the privilege of at least a momentary fantasy of the

whole world fed, even as it is bookended by “heterosexuals out the wazoo”. Whether compulsory heterosexuality and the concomitant gendered and other norms it represents are also what bookend the possibility of this fantasy is a question the poem raises here.

That the next line offers one significant respite — the homoerotic space of Girl Scout camp — from both worry and these norms is no accident:

what that place had been
for generations of baby lesbians
it was for her. And I, as well, was happy there […]

Sedgwick here draws upon a set of traditions of women finding homoerotic spaces — e.g., the summer camp, the boarding school, self-imposed exile to another country — outside of the (hetero)normative “domestic politics of [U.S.] post-war”, politics she describes in detail in the next few stanzas as perhaps a reason her muse deserts her and retreats into silence and “untestifying”, an allusion to the McCarthy hearings. At camp, both are fed, although they are not a “we”. The muse is the “baby lesbian”, the “I” simply “was happy there”. Why such a flat description? Does the speaker lack, perhaps because of the bland homogeneity of her world, anything more complicated in terms of an affective register with which to describe her feelings? (Recall “pleasant” versus “pleasure”). Or is something else going on?

Much in the same way Sedgwick’s construction of the muse recalls Plath’s, her deliberate use of such a flat term connects the

47 Sedgwick attended Girl Scout camp and, in A Dialogue of Love, she describes the female–female homoerotic community it provided her. She and I were also in on-going conversations about this space, as it is one I explore in my own writings (Kent, “‘No Trespassing”: Girl Scout Camp and the Limits of the Counterpublic Sphere’, Women and Performance: A Journal of Feminist Theory 8.2 (1996), 183–203; reprinted in Steven Bruhm and Natasha Hurley, eds., Curiouser: On the Queerness of Children (Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 2004), 173–189. In A Dialogue on Love, Sedgwick uses the term “happy” once in a way that seems more affectively alive, but when she does so, as if to create this effect, she italicizes it (207).
poem to another American woman writer, Elizabeth Bishop's, use of such techniques in ‘Crusoe in England’ (1976).\(^{48}\) Crusoe, looking back to his time on the island, tries to represent the way Friday made him feel:

Just when I thought I couldn’t stand it another minute longer, Friday came.  
(Accounts of that have everything all wrong.)  
Friday was nice.  
Friday was nice, and we were friends.\(^{49}\)

The use of the bland term “nice”, as well as the seemingly innocuous yet loaded “friends” (and recall Sedgwick’s use of the term) fails deliberately, flauntingly, to convey the complexity of Crusoe’s relationship to Friday. Bishop uses these words to signify an inability to put into language homoerotic desires, both because of the prohibition against their revelation, and because of the way no language exists to do justice to such a relation. Read biographically, ‘Crusoe’ is often seen to allude to Bishop’s relation to Lota de Macedo Soares, Bishop’s Brazilian lover (and the description of their life together on the desert island likened to Bishop’s choice to live as an expatriate), and the ways in which their own desires could not be openly represented in the fifties culture of Sedgwick’s childhood.\(^{50}\)

But while “Crusoe mourns the loss of Friday”, the “I” confides that the she “fe[eds]/as much on the longing for [the muse], / on the body of her long refusal / to be with me” as on anything else. That is to say, the poet is nourished erotically and otherwise by

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\(^{49}\) Bishop, ‘Crusoe in England’, 165.

\(^{50}\) For an extended reading of this poem and its erotics, one with which Sedgwick was intimately aware, see Kent, *Making Girls into Women*, 224–227. Helen Vendler addresses the flatness of a more generic, universalizing love in ‘Elizabeth Bishop: Domestication, Domesticity, and the Otherworldly’, in *Part of Nature, Part of Us* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1980), 106. Sedgwick was very familiar with my work on Bishop, having co-chaired my dissertation, which formed the basis for my book.
the lack or absence of the muse and the productive unfulfilled desire this produces. Indeed, the poem describes how the “I” learns to live her own life apart from the muse:

[I] [w]as nourished, and gave nurture.
Had my own queer enough aesthetic, it turned out.
Had even my own loves, which weren’t all hers.
Fat amazon, found courage, such as it was,
including if I had to,
the courage to survive her.
Learned more about the shape
my own refusals took:
never to claim. Never to disavow.

These lines delineate the process by which the “I”, in part because of the muse’s desertion, develops her singularity and her own “queer enough aesthetic”. “Queer enough” resonates with “good enough” — while it may not live up to some regulatory vision of homosexuality, it is enough for her. “Aesthetic” signals the ability to create art without the muse. There is a sense of self-sufficiency, along with shared “loves”, and the “I” has some that are all “her own”. The speaker names herself a “[f]at amazon”, a reference to lesbian feminist iconography — the warrior woman able to exist without men, although this time without her female muse as well. The “I” also describes the courage she has “found” — a courage to “survive” the muse. “To survive” means to endure and to overcome the loss of, but also to live through, the muse’s moods and those she creates in the speaker — including the ebb and flow of depression. “To survive” is also to live beyond, as in survive after, whether an absence, which is likened to a death, or an actual death. Finally, in the face of the muse’s

51 In A Dialogue on Love, in the same paragraph in which the epigraph to this paper appears, Sedgwick describes how writing poetry was for her always a struggle and that losing the muse, the “loss of poetry” altogether, which happened in her thirties, was one of the great losses of her life, equal to the loss of a significant relationship and to the deaths of some crucial people in her life.
repeated refusals, the “I” has “learned more about the shape / my own refusals took: / never to claim. Never to disavow”.

But to refuse to claim or disavow what? Most obviously, in the logic of the poem, this description might indicate a stance toward the muse, as toward a lover, a child, a friend, or an object: “I will not claim, i.e., possess you, but nor will I repudiate you”. On another level, this description resonates with the processes of subject formation in relation to the other. “Claim” and “disavow” do not mark exactly the same processes as the Oedipal, where one must identify with the parent (and thus kill off and repudiate them) that characterize the normative Freudian account of the daughter’s relation to the mother. Nor do they fully match Klein’s “paranoid position”: “For Klein’s infant or adult, the paranoid position — understandably marked by hatred, envy, and anxiety — is a position of terrible alertness to the dangers posed by the hateful and envious part-objects that one defensively projects into, carves out of, and ingests from the world around one”.52 Nonetheless, the terms invoke a binary that the “I” rejects in favour of something else, an embrace of an in-between, “changing and heterogeneous relational stances”, to bring back Sedgwick’s description of the reparative position. This part of the poem advocates a different, reparative stance towards the muse and the world, not trying either to claim the muse for her own purposes or to disavow her with a kind of finality that defensively anticipates or even repeats the muse’s prior disavowal.

In A Dialogue on Love, Sedgwick charts how, in the midst of surviving [my word] the approaching deaths of a relative and a dear friend,

my poetry has returned. And returning with it, and with [her therapist’s] escort, is some long-ago life of the girl whose first passion it was. What it’s feeling like to me isn’t death, but a great, upwelling flux of mutability

52 Sedgwick, Touching Feeling, 128.
as if, falling in,
you’d emerge young — old — dead — a
different person —

She does not “feel like” death, but transformation. On the other hand, when the muse finally, in the third-to-last stanza, returns in ‘Who Fed This Muse?’, while there is a similar experience of falling and of the “flux of mutability”, of becoming “a different person”, the affective valences of this reunion are more complex. The “I” describes how she is changed by the presence of the muse:

This morning somehow she was at my side again —
it seemed so natural,
an “I” I guess I am when she is there.
But maybe not the old one…

The muse “enfold[s the poet] with her” and the poet “[falls] into it all / the vat of [the muse’s] unmakings, her returns, / bottomless eyes, her halting narrow tongue”. But the moment cannot last. The erotic resonances of these images are immediately complicated by the fact that the muse also brings back “all the old saturnine / ways”, i.e. gloom, depression, and “utopian” here can finally only mean “hearing her / silent No to the last / loamy reverberation”. Once again the two have found the homoerotic connection that constitutes a joining the “I” has longed for throughout the work (and for much of her adult life, the length of time the muse has been away). But while the slippage throughout the poem between the “I” and the “muse” deliberately alludes to theories of lesbian (inter)subjectivity, this couple is never idealized as it is in the writings of Rich, Luce Irigaray or Monique Wittig. Sedgwick’s “I” and “muse” are neither perfectly

54 Jason Edwards’ reading of A Dialogue on Love picks up on this trend in Sedgwick’s work. For more, see Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (London: Routledge, 2009), esp. 130.
equal (Rich) nor disruptive of patriarchal linguistic conventions (Irigaray). Their joining never dissolves the subject/other binary (Wittig).  

In the quotation from *A Dialogue on Love* cited above, in which Sedgwick tells her therapist about the return of her ability to write poetry, she does not actually say “my muse”, she says “my poetry”. What is the connection between the two? And what distinguishes poetry from prose for Sedgwick? How far away is it from her critical writing, which is itself, at moments, very literary (even Jamesian)? What is the generic divide, if any, between her poetry and her prose? *A Dialogue on Love* calls into question this divide as it experiments with the imposition of an extremely constraining poetic form on content by alternating, in a seemingly arbitrary way, between conventional prose and haiku. To some, ‘Who Fed This Muse?’ might itself not be considered “great” poetry. Sedgwick anticipates this criticism in her description of the muse’s lack of traditional female talent: “[A] nother thing — [the muse] couldn’t sing”. The muse can’t sing and can’t dance “with her bad feet” (an obvious connection to poetic meter and form) though she adores — in a more than a slightly sadomasochistic fashion — her dancing lessons. Making poetry becomes analogous to various forms of literal, aesthetic performance, and the muse fails, at least in terms of conventional standards of what “good” singing and dancing mean for a suburban girl.

In the poem it is Hal who insists that the muse has poetic power, that

it was in her nature as she was born

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56 And here I am revealing my opinion — elsewhere in the larger project I discuss at length critiques of Sedgwick’s prose style, which was parodied and considered by some to be impenetrable, needlessly baroque, etc.

57 See Sedgwick’s discussion of ballet in *Tendencies*, 186.
to be elastic, even graceful; she somewhere had a voice to sing that was mobile and affecting[.]

The enjambment here, especially in the line that invokes elasticity, recalls Sedgwick’s theorization of this technique in ‘A Poem Is Being Written’: the ability to take in, to take it, to be anally penetrated, and the rhythm of spanking, that for her are instantiated in certain forms of poetry. Sexual allusions proliferate at this moment in the poem, but one thing is clear: Sedgwick is well aware of the criticisms one might make of her art, and, by extension, her muse; in this work she anticipates them and performs them, not only at the level of content, but of form: at various points, the lines appear to stumble into iambics or assonances or alliterations, but the more one studies such moments, as I have demonstrated above, the more one sees how significant they are. In so doing, the poem, and Sedgwick through it, addresses the criticisms of her writing’s “gracelessness”, even accepts them “if graceless be” the muse’s way.

‘Who Fed This Muse?’ also addresses the critics who fault her because, in her critical writing, she focuses almost wholly on male–male homoerotics in male-authored fiction. The poem returns to that moment in ‘A Poem is Being Written’ I cited at the beginning of this essay to reconsider the “passionate and loving relationships” Sedgwick had with women, including a female muse who, at times, embodies depression and, at other times, inspires love. But while this poem and its contexts illustrate how she did, at times, make a not-so-obvious swerve that would have connect[ed] my homosexual desire and identification with my need and love, as a woman, of women”, to claim Sedgwick for the lesbian nation would be to foreshorten and foreclose the many, complex ways she moved back and forth, backwards and forwards, temporally, physically, and psychically, between so many different, thoroughly queer, kinds of forms of love and
desire. In so doing, Sedgwick refuses to idealize or isolate the homoerotic couple at the heart of her poetry: she and her muse were fed by so many more diverse “beloved[s]”, more than can be contained in any particular minoritarian, political, dare I say “paranoid” vision, or in any normative view of what constitutes “literature”. Similarly, their relationship itself never settles on, claims or disavows any one model, whether it be rosy (lesbian-feminist) or maternal-filial-homicidal (Freud and others); if anything, it answers current calls, such as Sharon Marcus’, to think more fully and complexly about relationships “between women” and her title itself an echo of Sedgwick’s Between Men.

Indeed, this poem constitutes one of the instances, if not the most important and thorough instance, in Sedgwick’s entire oeuvre where she addresses and taxonomizes her desires, identifications and dis-identifications, debts and gifts, to and from other women. The last line of the stanza in which they are reunited reads: “[The muse’s] presence seemed a promise to me, and I was happy”. Yet even this line carries with it twinges of ambivalence and ambiguity; the alliteration of presence and promise bespeak commitment and continuity, but the “seemed” calls into question any certainty that the muse will stay. Similarly, the flatness of happy, while it recalls the blissful homosociality of scout camp, also reminds us that the muse incites as many or more strong feelings through her absence and at least as much depression (albeit often productive) as contentment. Furthermore, as much as queer self-pleasuring gives birth to the muse, as much as the muse is the “butch” to the “I”’s femme, the “I” never identifies as a “baby lesbian”. Recall, however, that the “I” states she “was in love with [the muse], a lot” and implies by the line “But she would court me too!” that the “I” has also

worked hard to court her. Writing poetry appears to be not only the performative coming together — whether it be produced by the sister-lover like tangle of the “I” with the muse’s moods, the eroticized loss and reunion of mother and daughter, or the subject-shattering fantasy of self-other that distinguishes some feminist valuations of lesbian sex — but also the performative splitting apart of the muse and the “I”. Finally, then, whether or not the “I” identifies as a lesbian, writing poetry as Sedgwick theorizes it here constitutes a female–female (auto)erotic act. And the traditions this poem draws upon link her to other women writers and critics, some of whom also considered how to make female–female (auto) erotics part of the form and the content of their work.

In performing this reading, I, in the main, am following Sedgwick’s lead, have chosen “reparative motives” over paranoid ones. Perhaps this reading is “merely reformist”, and it certainly carries with it the “pleasure” of the “merely aesthetic”, in its choice to privilege close readings over any particular theoretical purity or “insistence that everything means one thing”. But as Sedgwick asks, “What makes pleasure and amelioration so ‘mere’?”

60 Sedgwick, Touching Feeling, 144.
61 Sedgwick, Touching Feeling, 136.
62 Sedgwick, Touching Feeling, 144. In her essay, ‘Melanie Klein and the Difference Affect Makes’, Sedgwick does a reading of another one of her own poems from Fat Art, Thin Art, ‘What I Would Be When I Grew Up’. This reading resonates, yet differs, from my own of ‘Who Fed This Muse?’ The former poem personifies her “talent”, rather than her muse, and, in it, Sedgwick positions herself unambiguously as the talent’s “big sister”. She explains, in the essay, that, having read Klein, she can now understand this little sibling as an example of a “good internal object”, and she conceives of the relation between them as one that “is conceived of as virtually intersubjective, profoundly ambivalent, and a locus of anybody’s special inventiveness” (The Weather in Proust, 127). Sedgwick views her “talent” as this object, as what “makes a relational space for me, however troubled, in which an orientation toward futurity and creation becomes possible” (128). While it is tempting, especially after reading this last description, which resembles, in many ways, my reading of the muse, to equate Sedgwick’s talent with her muse, they are not the same and neither is her relation to them. Her talent is some-
thing she feels she never loses, something that stay with her even though she has “abused, betrayed it a thousand times”, as she puts it in the poem (128). Sedgwick’s muse, by contrast, deserts her — while by the end of the poem some kind of reunion occurs with the “I”, their shifting, unstable relation makes it a much more complex relationship of self to (internal) other/object. Moreover, Sedgwick’s talent guides everything she does, not just the writing of poetry. But the resemblance still indicates the moves toward the reparative I would argue Sedgwick is trying to initiate in ‘Who Fed This Muse?’.