

Winslow Baril

ENGL 342

Sarah Crover

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The Act of Creation: An Exploration of Transgender Possibilities
in *Paradise Lost* Through Pottery

As my friend Julian puts it, only half winkingly: “God blessed me by making me transsexual for the same reason God made wheat but not bread and fruit but not wine, so that humanity might share in the act of creation.”

– Daniel M. Lavery

My final project for this course is a coil-built amphora vase depicting Adam and Eve as transgender beings. This project was made using cone 6 clay and was created in both the Nanaimo Parks and Recreation Centre and at my kitchen table. My foundational text for this project is Milton’s *Paradise Lost*, up to Book IV. This project has been an exploration of many aspects, but namely, creation, gender, and spirituality.

Building

My initial idea for this project had been grandiose, to say the least. What started as the intention to create three vases became the fight to finish even one. Such is life, though – sometimes we must scale back our intentions, despite how far we’d like to reach. The method I went with to create my vase was the coil method, which involves either rolling out or extruding

(the extrusion process involves a simple device which utilizes a lever mechanism and applied pressure to create different shapes – in this instance, long tubes of clay) individual coils and then stacking them and smoothing them together until the desired shape is reached (See Fig. 1 and 2). This was a new method for me, and required some practice. In a way, I think that my chosen method was quite fitting; like a body, it developed in increments, not all at once.



Fig. 1: Hand-rolled coils for building.



Fig. 2: The beginning layers of a vase

My first of three attempts at a vase did not include anything more than a brief glance at a YouTube tutorial. The body itself did not get much farther than what figures 1 and 2 show, but it was an incredibly useful step, as I was able to experiment with the methods that worked best for me. I used the space at the Rec Centre to make my initial attempt. Figures 3 and 4 depict my second attempt at a vase as it was built and refined layer by layer.



Fig. 3

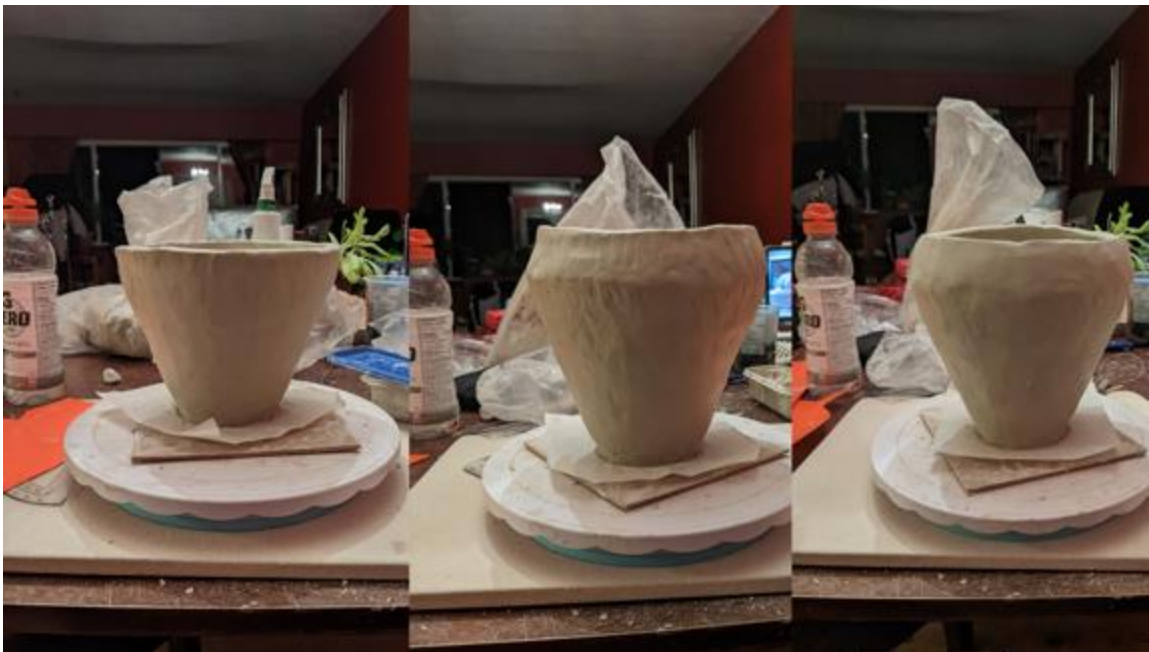


Fig. 4: The gradual process of heightening and smoothing the walls of the vase

My second vase was built at home, which made for a much easier process. The privacy of my home made me less self-conscious about my beginner skill level and made it a much more enjoyable and productive process. This time, I employed the use of a guide cut out of paper (see fig. 5) in order to help keep my shape consistent.

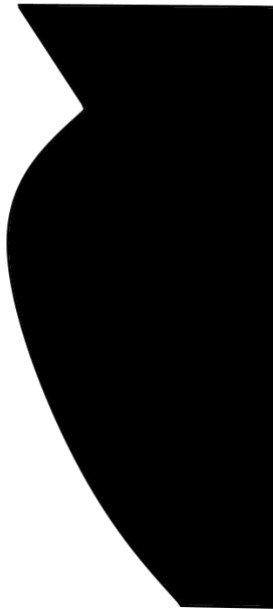


Fig. 5: Shape of a vase's silhouette, used to make a consistent vessel; this shape is cut out of cardboard or paper and held to the profile of the vase during construction in order to ensure that the form is staying consistent.

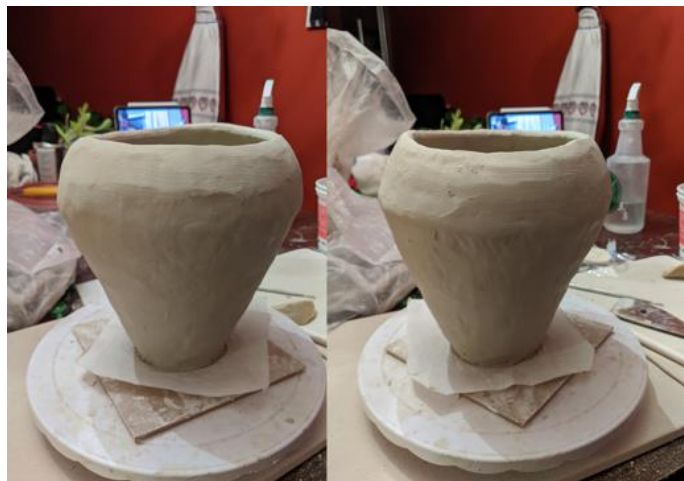


Fig. 6: My second vase, moderately smoothed

As mentioned, this was my second of three attempts (see fig. 6). It turned out that this vase was too tall, and would have been difficult to transport to the Rec Centre in order to get fired. Therefore, in the interest of reusing my clay and of checking the thickness of the walls and looking for any potential air bubbles, I cut it in half (see fig. 7).



Fig. 7: My second vase, cut in half vertically

There's something bittersweet about destroying what took hours of work. To some, the original work may be considered as having been a waste of time. To others – and, more importantly, to me – it's a reminder of the impermanence of being and of shape, and of the value

of practice and of patience. Like God creating Eve and Adam with the forbidden fruit tree in plain view, destruction takes a crucial (and paradoxical) role within the creation of so-called perfection. The procedure of cutting work in half is common in pottery and ceramics, as it gives the creator a cross-section, revealing potential inconsistencies in the work and encouraging improvement. In this case, the walls of the vessel were quite thick, which would have made it very heavy, and likely would have made for a problematic drying process. One of my favorite things about clay as a medium is that it can be reused indefinitely so long as it has not been bisque fired, even if it has become completely dry. You just have to add water, mix well, and wait until it becomes a workable texture again (see fig. 8).



Fig. 8: A container of slip, made from clay scraps and fragments, ready to be used again



Fig. 9: My third and final vase, nearly completed

My third vase (see fig. 9) was mainly built in two sessions at the Rec Centre. This time around, I used extruded coils rather than hand-rolling them. This had the benefit of a consistent thickness all around, but the disadvantage of having to use the extruder, which requires a lot of strength and a subsequent cleaning.

While at the Rec Centre, I had a lot of comments from strangers such as “What are you making?” and “I’ve never seen anyone build one that way!” and “It looks great, what’s it for?” I appreciated the curiosity greatly, as I enjoy talking about my process but I have anxiety about asking outright for an opinion. In the months since this project was completed, I’ve been told that frequent users of the studio were asking after “the guy who made that vase, the English major,” which felt incredibly validating: to be recognized and thought after, to be seen and understood in any capacity, is something close to euphoria.

I brought my vase home to finish it by adding handles (see fig. 10), drying it, and moving onto the painting process.



Fig. 10: Pulled handles: My favorite two are chosen to go on the final vessel.



Fig. 11: Finished vessel with its handles attached. Not yet dried or painted.

Further refinement from this point is possible. However, I ultimately preferred to leave the surface slightly irregular (see fig. 11). To me, this acts as evidence that the vessel was lovingly and painstakingly made by human hands. It's nice to see yourself reflected back at you within the things you've created.

After the form of my vase was finished, it was time to allow it to dry, and then to tackle the painting process (see fig. 12 and 13).



Fig. 12: The outlines of the figures of Adam and Eve, and the base layer of underglaze



Fig. 13: Painted figures of Adam and Eve as well as the background colour of my vase, a sunshine orange-and-yellow gradient



Fig. 14: Finished paintings of Adam and Eve as well as Genesis 3:19 on the opposite of the piece

The embellished verse on the reverse side of the vase (see fig. 14) is itself an embellishment—essentially an amalgamation of two translations (ESV and NIV) since I liked aspects of both. It reads as follows:

By the sweat of your brow
You will eat your food
Until you return to the ground
Since from it you were taken
For you are dust,
And to dust you shall return
Genesis 3:19

This, too, mirrors identity in a way – we pick and choose things to keep from multiple sources. The nude forms of Eve and Adam are thus depicted: Adam, with lines on his chest denoting top surgery, as well as a smooth pelvic region; and Eve with breast tissue and a penis. It is important to note that these are physical representations of *some* transgender expressions of gender, but they are not the only ones. We, as humans, are an amalgam of parts, some inherent, some learned, some embellished; the transgender body is merely one example of this.



Fig. 15: Finished greenware vase. The end result looks pale now, until it's fired and then glazed.



Fig. 16: Top-down view of the vase. Embellishments were added using a method called slip-trailing, in which underglaze is placed in a needle-nosed bottle and trailed onto the surface of the vessel.

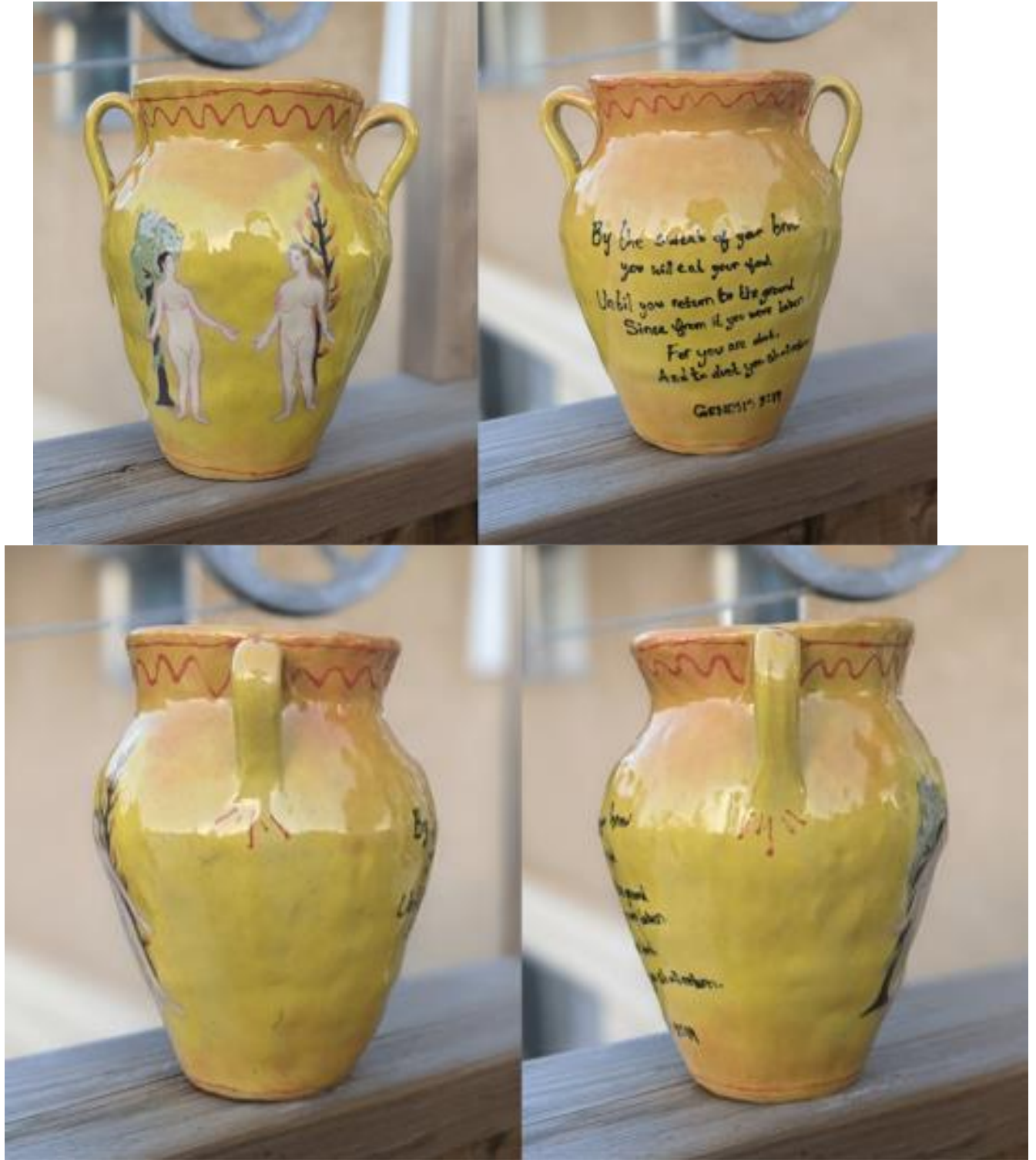


Fig. 17: Front, back, and side views of the vase, fired and glazed. The finished form is slightly bumpy in places, denoting the human fingers that formed it. The glaze catches the late afternoon sun on my deck.



Fig. 18: Having “bent down [my] eye”: a top-down view of the finished vase, glazed and fired

Significance

*Then the Lord God formed a man from the dust of the ground and
breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a
living being.*

– *Genesis 2:7, NIV*

*In the sweat of thy face shalt thou eat bread,
Till thou return unto the ground, for thou
Out of the ground wast taken: know thy birth,
For dust thou art, and shalt to dust return.*

– Milton, *Paradise Lost*, X.205-208.

From what amounts to dust mixed with water, I made a vase (see fig. 15-18). So, where do gender and spirituality come in? David Morgan, in his essay about sacred and fine art, states that the “specialness of beautiful objects [is] understood to be a means of glorifying and pleasing God or the saints in order to garner blessings from them” (642). However, he also says that “it is important not to reduce the definition of ‘sacred’ to gods or religious cult[s]” (657) – in this instance, my definition of ‘sacred’ lies in the transsexual body and my intent with this project is to venerate it. By tying the first humans to transsexuality, I am inverting the popular notion that transsexuals are “born in the wrong body,” or else going against God’s will in some way – despite some popular schools of Christian thought, God does not make mistakes. From my perspective as a trans person, the act of taking one’s own physical transformation into their own

hands is God-like – both as subject and artist, a transsexual individual takes the responsibility of creation into their own hands.

In order to further elucidate what gender means to me, I turn to Judith Butler, who describes gender as “a stylized repetition of acts” (*Gender Trouble* 191) which is “both intentional and performative” (190). In other words, it is something that is not inherent – we are not born one particular gender but rather assigned one. Butler quotes Simone de Beauvoir in saying that “one is not born a woman, but rather becomes one” (1), meaning that through socialization and cultural expectations, each individual is expected to perform their assigned gender. By unlearning cultural norms and dedicating oneself to their own individual identity, they are creating something unique – not born but made, as is the nature of God’s creation. Butler further asserts that gender is not necessarily tied to sex (152) and questions whether “‘sex’ is as culturally constructed as gender” (9). If indeed sex and gender are cultural phenomena, it stands to reason that “unfallen Eden is a place without cis, binary sex and gender as we know it” (Friedman 284). Friedman further asserts:

[T]here is no ontological basis for a pre-Fall hierarchy based on human sex/gender. We are told that God’s spirit, that “one first matter all,” is distributed across each and all of God’s creations—and although the creations might be in “various forms,” and the amount of spirit is in “various degrees,” what differentiates something from something else is the “proportion” of spirit given to “each kind.” (286-287)

If Friedman is correct and form was less significant than spirit, the material parameters of that world, of Paradise, require rethinking. Bodies were a form that existed as an expression of the spirit, not function, and are therefore more malleable. Because of this, Eve and Adam – and even Paradise itself – resonated with me in a way I didn’t expect. They were made in God’s

image and are therefore perfect, meaning that this world without gender with its genderless beings is perfect, too. In Eden it is the spirit, and then the sexless body as an expression of spirit, that is worthy of veneration; it's only post-Fall that the forms of the body are differentiated in terms of sex and gender, at which point shame also appears as a "negative consequence of sin" (Ward 309).

Ward, in his paper discussing post-Fall shame, states that "you are created as a unique creature in God – that must not be erased but rather discovered and affirmed" (313-314). The discovery of one's truest self is not easy, and should be asserted with pride, regardless of whether it's the first step in someone's journey or a latter one. As a transsexual, discovery is the first and possibly the most frightening step in the process of creation – trying to familiarize yourself with the unfamiliar-yet-familiar and to see yourself in a different way; you, the brand new human; you, who are deserving of that harrowing and glorious and inevitable self-creation. The act of creation is twofold: the creation of the self, and the creation of the self-expression. As a "unique creature in God" (according to Ward), I must take the initiative in affirming my form, to the best of my ability. Taking these acts of creation into one's own hands is never easy, but this does not mean that it is unwise to pursue; rather, it reinforces the fact that creating oneself over again is one of the most important things a transsexual individual can do. Whitehead and Whitehead describe transsexuality as "the harrowing movement from bewilderment to a celebration of God's extravagance" (Whitehead and Whitehead 172) and further describe bewilderment "as a portal to humility" (172). Rather than expressing confusion or anger at the existence of transsexuals, Whitehead and Whitehead consider transsexuality to be "[a] boundless generosity [...] on exhibit throughout our world," and put forth the questions: "What are we to make of this extravagance? How are we to honor its generosity?" (174). There is reverence and love in each

of these authors' description of trans bodies. As Whitehead and Whitehead put it: "The bewilderment we experience when confronted with God's extravagance on display in the lives of our transgender sisters and brothers does not distress us, but bedazzles us. We do not search for a safe exit from our confusion but for a place to kneel" (184). By depicting Adam and Eve as a transgender man and woman, respectively, I am suggesting that the transgender experience is one that is natural, that it is as old as the story of humanity, and that it deserves to be venerated just as much as the first humans' biblical origin story. I chose clay as a medium for my creative project for two reasons. Firstly, because it's something I have moderate experience working with and enjoy a great deal. Secondly, because it has such a beautiful significance in so many ways. Clay, to me, is paradoxically both merciful and unforgiving – it is merciful in that you can use and reuse it, and it can be shaped to become anything you'd like, so long as you've the skill set to make it happen. This is where it is also unforgiving: it requires such great dedication to practice in order to get any good at working with it, as is the case with any of the arts. Still, something about the medium has me coming back again and again. The act of creating something out of clay is innately human to me (although, ironically, it is how the God of *Paradise Lost* created human beings). Clay shapes me as much as I shape it, as it tests patience and strength of will. In this way, both I and the clay are God.

As transsexuals, we create our bodies and our identities in much the same way. It takes a lot of trial and error, humility, and dedication to mould yourself into a shape that approximates what you have in your head. We must first view our gender as something that is malleable, and then do the work to dismantle it in order to create something new from those foundations – as I did with my vase. The body itself becomes a sacred object – a vase, perhaps – that must be crafted, the edges smoothed or left rough depending on the artist. According to Morgan, "art is

by itself essentially religious and moral” (643) and believes that “the sacredness of art” rests “in the modern era on the stature of the artist as an agent and progenitor of spiritual value” (645).

Just as Eve and Adam were created from the Earth (Genesis 2:7), the transsexual body is lovingly moulded into its desired form, infinitely malleable until one wishes to solidify it.

*For Spirits when they please
Can either Sex assume, or both; so soft
And uncompounded is their Essence pure,
Not ti'd or manacl'd with joynt or limb,
Nor founded on the brittle strength of bones,
Like cumbrous flesh; but in what shape they choose
Dilated or condens't, bright or obscure,
Can execute their aerie purposes,
And works of love or enmity fulfill.
Paradise Lost, I. 422-431*

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