# THE DREAMS OF MOTHERHOOD PRODUCE HYDRAS: MYTHOCRITIC AFTERLIVES OF THE LERNAEAN MONSTER FROM ANTIQUITY TO LOUISE ERDRICH'S POETRY[1]

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## ABSTRACT

Louise Erdrich's poem "Hydra," published in *Baptism of Desire* (1989), remains largely overlooked within the field of literary criticism. This article argues that the poem stands out for its original engagement with myth and cultural hybridity as it revisits the Greek myth of the Hydra transforming it into a meditation on the liminal experiences of pregnancy and the creative impulse. The Lernaean beast functions not merely as an intertextual reference, but as a symbolic framework that uncovers the poem's exploration of insomnia and reverie induced by pregnancy. By foregrounding Erdrich's negotiation between Catholic and Anishinaabe cosmologies, this study situates "Hydra" within a rigorously articulated bicultural poetics that both unsettles the authority of Eurocentric mythological traditions and inscribes a distinctly Indigenous-inflected reimagining of the Hydra figure. In so doing, it argues that Erdrich elaborates her own iteration of the myth, thereby enriching its mythocritic afterlives whilst contributing to contemporary debates on decolonial engagements with classical antiquity and advancing intersectional feminist readings of American poetry.

*Keywords:* Louise Erdrich; Native American Poetry; Lernaean Hydra Myth; Pregnancy; Poetics of Dreams.

DOI: 10.37536/reden.2026.7.3187

> human lives are full of fantasy –passive-day-dreaming which need not be acted on. But to write poetry … is not to fantasize, or to put fantasies on paper. For a poem to coalesce … there has to be an imaginative transformation of reality which is in no way passive
>
> Adrienne Rich[2]

[1] This research is part of a project funded by the Spanish Ministry of Science and Innovation, the Spanish State Research Agency (MICIU/AEI/10.13039/501100011033) and the European Regional Development Fund (FEDER, EU) (code PID2021-124841NB-I00), together with the Government of Aragón and the European Social Fund (ESF) (code H03_23R). On a personal note, I would like to express my sincere gratitude to my PhD supervisor, Dr José Antonio Llera, whose intellectual generosity and insightful feedback have shaped this work.

[2] *Essential Essays: Culture, Politics, and the Art of Poetry* (W. W. Norton & Company, 2018 [1979], 12).

Published in 1989, *Baptism of Desire* established Louise Erdrich as one of the most outstanding Native American poets of her generation. The collection also served to delimit the thematic concerns around which her later work would revolve. The volume centres on the mystical notion of the self's dissolution through the initiation rite of baptism, understood as the spiritual desire to integrate into a community—here, framed within a Native American imaginary. Erdrich's writing abounds with exchanges between Indigenous and Christian voices, as well as the crossing of physical and mystical boundaries, a development prefigured in her 1988 novel *Tracks*. Through the analysis of "Hydra" (Erdrich 1989, 41–47), this article aims to demonstrate Erdrich's revaluation of the classical myth of the Hydra to explore the liminal experiences of pregnancy.

*Baptism of Desire* is organised into five sections, reinforcing its Christian structural and thematical symbolism. This structure reflects Erdrich's interest in exploring the frontier between the divine and the human, juxtaposing the Catholic view of flesh as inherently sinful with the Indigenous conception of the body as "an integral part of spiritual understanding" (Kristianto 2013, 41). Positioned in the middle section of the volume, "Hydra" is a five-part unrhymed poem in which Gnostic and Classical Greek aesthetics intersect with the Native American trope of the trickster *holotrope*[3] "uncoiling through the length" of the poetical persona's life (Erdrich 1989, 41). To highlight the interpretation that Erdrich infers from the myth of the Hydra, I draw upon Jennifer McWeeny's (2014) theorisation on the intercorporeal exchange of flesh between the woman's body and nonhuman creatures seen from a phenomenological perspective. At the same time, I consider complementary perspectives on myth criticism articulated by Northrop Frye (1961) and Paul Radin (1956). Yet, such theoretical frameworks must be approached with methodological caution. When engaging with Native American literary traditions, one must remain attentive to the limits of Western taxonomies of the monstruous and the mythic, whose binary logics risk obscuring rather than illuminating Indigenous epistemologies. Rather than uncritically extending such categories to Louise Erdrich's poem "Hydra," this article interrogates their applicability, foregrounding the generative and relational possibilities through which transgressive figures operate within Indigenous cosmologies (Bruchac 1987; Allen 1992). In this way, the reader will be able to discern the complexities of Erdrich's hybrid cultural belonging rooted, on the one hand, in her Catholic German American upbringing and, on the other, in her Indigenous identity as an enrolled member of Turtle Mountain Band of Chippewa Indians of North Dakota. Examining the

[3] In *Manifest Manners: Narratives on Postindian Survivance* (1999), Gerald Vizenor presents the trickster, an androgynous creature that acts as a "liberator in literature", as a border-crossing figure "that ties the unconscious to social experience" (89). In his words, trickster stories "are the *holotropes* of imagination" (15), conveying the abstraction of a being advancing toward fulfilment regardless of factual or imaginary boundaries.

reception of Greek mythology in contemporary American Indian poetry is particularly pertinent, as it occupies a significant place in Louise Erdrich's verse.

## 1. Review of Literature: Of Hydras and Water Serpents

### *1.1 Classical Sources*

A crab pinching Hercules's naked foot. A dim fire carried by his nephew Iolaus, lighting every human and nonhuman body. Silence after the wound has been slashed: the grotto of terror opens at night. Whenever I come to these images interwoven together, I cannot help but recalling Francisco de Zurbarán's *Hercules and the Hydra* (Fig. 1) translating into painting the monstrosity of a mythological night. While the myth of Hercules and his twelve labours is widely known, the Hydra has received comparatively little attention from contemporary United States poets[4]. This relative absence makes the Hydra an intriguing subject for philological study. Drawing on Elder J. Ríos's (2021, 18) updated version of the myth, Hera sends the giant crab Carcinos to assist the Hydra by attacking Heracles's feet. Enraged, Heracles crushes the crab and, with his nephew Iolaus, discovers a method to prevent the Hydra's regenerative heads by cauterising each severed neck with fire. Ultimately, Heracles defeats the monster, buries its immortal main head under a rock near Lerna, and uses the Hydra's poisonous fluids to tip his arrows, ensuring their lethality. The Hydra thus embodies a complex blend of classical heroism, monstrous threat, and transformative power, offering rich potential for literary and artistic exploration. This myth, first crystallised in ancient Greek mythology, has exerted fertile inspiration across centuries and literary traditions. Its endurance lies not only in its dramatic monstrosity, but also in its malleability as a cultural signifier, turning it into what we may call mythopoetic plasticity. As Enrique Dussel (2016, 12) reminds us, myths are never simply irrational or ornamental, "symbolic narratives" with a "double meaning" that necessitate a hermeneutic effort to uncover their existential rationale. The Hydra—and its cognates in the broader family of water serpents—has long functioned as a polyvalent figure: a moral allegory, a theological

Fig 1. Francisco de Zurbarán, Hercules and the Hydra (1634). Oil on canvas, 133 x 167 cm. Museo Nacional del Prado.

[4] However, decolonial reinterpretations are present in Natalie Diaz's poetry. References to Theseus and the Minotaur can be found in "Asterion's Lament" and "I, Minotaur" from *Postcolonial Love Poem* (2020, Faber&Faber).

cipher and, above all, a metaphor. Let us not forget, in this sense, poet and Hellenist Luis Alberto de Cuenca's (1988, 147) words when affirming that myths are the convergence of poetry and religion.

The Hydra's earliest appearances are found in archaic Greek poetry and mythography. In *Theogony*, Hesiod (1914, 103) describes the creature as an "evil-minded" being, parent of the Chimaera and marked by a multiplicity of heads—lion, goat, and serpent. This hybrid configuration renders the Hydra a liminal entity that resists categorisation, embodying both monstrous alterity and generative possibility. Other authors systematise and disseminate the myth. Apollodorus, in his *Bibliotheca* (1985, 105), offers one of the most influential narrative accounts, situating the Hydra firmly within the canon of Heraclean labours. Hyginus, in *Fabulae* (2009, 118), also rehearses the myth, underscoring its function as a moral test for the hero. By the late Middle Ages, Henry of Villena's *The Twelve Works of Hercules* (1499) (Fig. 2) reinfects the Hydra within a Christianised allegorical framework, emblematising sin and vice. The medieval bestiary tradition was particularly invested in the Hydra as a theological figure. Pierre de Beauvais, in his *Bestiaire* (1980, 41–42), portrays the monster as the eternal adversary of the crocodile, which symbolises death and hell. In this allegory, the Hydra is assimilated to Christ: just as Christ's incarnation and descent into hell culminate in the harrowing of the infernal realm, so too does the Hydra's struggle against the crocodile embody salvation. For his part, Malaxecheverría's compilation (1989, 191–92) reinforces an interpretive trajectory by equating the *hydrus*—a Nile-dwelling serpent—with Christ's triumph over death, thereby transposing the Greek monster into a Christian salvific allegory.

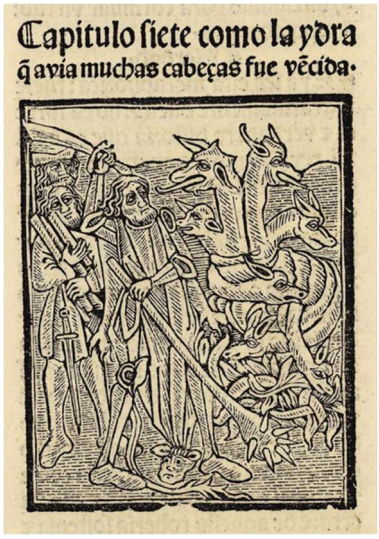


Fig 2. Henry of Aragon, Duke of Villena. The Twelve Works of Hercules, 1499. National Library of Spain.

The impossibility of providing a comprehensive historiography of the Hydra motif has been acknowledged by many scholars, given its vast dissemination across literary, philosophical, and theological traditions. Nevertheless, certain nodes stand out. In dictionaries of symbols and bestiaries, the Hydra is consistently aligned with vice and the perils of uncontrolled desire. Jean Chevalier and Alain Gheerbrant identify the Hydra's regenerative heads as an allegory for the persistence of human vices—each act of repression merely spawning further manifestations (1996, 534–35). This moralised reading is indebted to Paul Diel's *Le symbolisme dans la mythologie grecque* (1952), where the Hydra epitomises the cyclical nature of temptation and relapse. Such readings reveal the Hydra's capacity to migrate across symbolic registers, oscillating between monstrous excess and redemptive prefiguration. Jorge Luis Borges revisits this long tradition, tracing the Hydra through the writings of Diodorus, Apollodorus, and Lemprière (2007, 28). He

emphasises not only the creature's lethal breath, capable of poisoning water and air, but also its theological reworking, noting how Juno reared the beast as a counterforce to Hercules. Borges's meditation illustrates the Hydra's role as both an object of philological inquiry and a figure of metaphysical speculation. Beyond its function as a mythological beast, the Hydra also appears in ancient etymological traditions as a toponym. Cameron S. Laird notes that Eusebius (2021, 259), in *Aenigma 41*, associates the Hydra with "de chelidro serpent." Drawing from Isidore of Seville's *Etymologiae*, Laird underlines that the Hydra was thought to designate not merely a creature but also "constat Hydram fuisse evomentem aquas, vastantem vicinam civitatem," that is, "a place pouring forth water, devastating the nearby city" (259). This conflation of monster and landscape foregrounds the Hydra's hydrological associations, aligning it with forces of inundation, disease, and ecological disruption.

The serpent, as a broader mythological archetype, has carried ambivalent connotations across Judeo-Christian and Gnostic traditions. In the Bible, the snake embodies both sin and knowledge; in Gnosticism, it is refigured as a bearer of wisdom and mediator of salvation. For his part, Mircea Eliade identifies in the Gnostic scripture entitled *Acts of Thomas*[5] an allegory in which a monstrous serpent guards a pearl symbolising spiritual salvation. The quest narrative, with its initiatory trials, echoes the Hydra's function as an obstacle that must be overcome by divine or heroic assistance. Eliade (1991, 164) also highlights the serpent's paradoxical status as both nocturnal menace and symbol of periodic renewal, forming part of an oppositional pair with figures such as the stag or eagle. The Hydra, as both adversary and symbol of regeneration, encapsulates this tension between destruction and renewal.

### *1.2 Indigenous Legends*

The figure of the Hydra assumes a central role in Louise Erdrich's *Baptism of Desire*. Somewhat unexpectedly, there are also allusions to this serpent figure in Native American myths and legends, although these are generally not attributed to the morphology of the snake *per se*, but rather to other reptiles or hybrids akin to water monsters. In the Iroquois tradition, a myth describes a monstrous "water-serpent" (Spence 1992, 57), reminiscent of the Hydra. The tale recounts a hunter's confrontation with the dragon-like creature dwelling in stagnant waters. Armed with arrows, the hunter wounds the beast,

[5] This is of great interest for the understanding of Erdrich's poem, given that she acknowledges her reading of Barnstone's edition of *The Other Bible* (1984), which contains a passage entitled "Concerning the Serpent". In the chapter, the apostle Judas Thomas, identified as the twin of the Messiah, encounters a great serpent during his travels in India. Thomas questions the snake about its origins and nature, revealing Gnostic themes of cosmic evil and spiritual struggle. This symbolic meeting reinforces the crossing of Catholic and Gnostic boundaries and thus invigorates Erdrich's revaluation of the Hydra.

provoking violent thrashings and turmoil as it rises from the blood-stained lake. After fierce contortions, the serpent gradually weakens, and its enormous body sinks back beneath the surface. This symbolic narrative, much like the Hydra myth, illustrates humanity's struggle against chaos, danger, and destructive forces hidden in nature, underscoring the victory of skill and determination over overwhelming, threatening powers from the depths. Water monsters, in Native American mythology, are also provided with magical powers. As Colin Taylor notes (1994), "Their power was in their horns and tails which they could push out or draw in as they wished" (47). To the Southeastern Indian, Gary Carden (1994) notes, the hawk and the serpent stand as immortal beings. Equivalent to the Hydra, he distinguishes a particular water serpent called *Uktena*, only capable of dying if attacked by the Great Hawk (18).

However, depending on the tribe, this creature acquires different representations. In Cherokee mythology, the Great Serpent is adorned with flashing jewels, colourful bands, and sometimes wings. In this account, a Shawano shaman kills the creature, retrieving its magic stone, which brings prosperity to the Cherokee people. However, a drop of the serpent's blood strikes the shaman, causing a red-eyed snake to grow from his head. Bound to the stone and the snake, he becomes a slave, compelled to kill to sustain them, highlighting the peril and transformative consequences of confronting powerful, supernatural forces (Carden 1994, 18–19). Other American Indian myths such as the Kwakiutl stories, picture water creatures under the name of *Sisiutl*, "a double-headed serpent with darting tongues and a human face in the center of its body" (Sheehan 1994, 89). Moreover, the Great Lakes tribes consider the marine monster to live underwater, while adopting a "mammalian form" (Oberholtzer 1994, 130). As we are told, "In its serpentine form, its flesh was pure copper and it possessed horns, a hairy body, and, occasionally, legs" (130). As Oberholtzer observes, the serpent parallels the role of waterfowl in Native American mythologies such as the Iroquoian creation story, which intervenes to suspend Sky Woman's[6] fall into the watery underworld until the earth can be constituted (135).

## 2. Erdrich's Mythopoesis

In an article for *The New York Times*, Louise Erdrich (1985) argued that Native American writers must undertake the critical task of developing literature grounded in Indigenous epistemologies and cultural memory, thereby differentiating their work from the dominant paradigms of non-Native literary production. "In the light of enormous loss," she stated, "they must tell the stories of contemporary survivors while projecting and celebrating the cores of cultures left in the wake of the catastrophe. And in this, there always

[6] Sky Woman, the protagonist of the Iroquois Creation Myth, is a goddess who gives birth to twin sons, Sapling—the generator of Good: animals, rivers, fish, plants—and Flint—the destroyer of Sapling's creations and the instigator of evil through thorns, bones, monsters, winter, etc.

remains the land" (1). Erdrich's use of mythological figures to enhance Native American characters in her way to survival is recurrent through her literary world. Relying on trickster figures, European myths and Winnebago stories, myth in her work serves as the river that allows for the intermingling of cultures, religions and their ceremonies. In this light, Paula Gunn Allen (1992) has reflected on the usage of myth by Native writers as a didactic, stylistic and healing literary tool. According to her, "Myth functions as an affirmation of self that transcends the temporal. It guides our attention toward a view of ourselves, a possibility, that we might not otherwise encounter" (116).

Erdrich's mythopoesis, that is, her making of a new Hydra myth (Dussel 2016, 12) depicts the creature as possessing shapeshifting qualities[7], a motif recurrent in Erdrich's poetry, where metamorphoses—particularly involving women transforming into animals—abound across her work. Such a figure may be interpreted either as a liminal fusion of non/human existence, or as a trickster in the shape of an androgynous water serpent that uncannily ripples the interior rhythms of pregnancy. To substantiate the identification of the foetus as a liminal being oscillating between destruction and creation, I proceed from the premise that, in Erdrich's poem, this figure operates as a trickster archetype. Such a reading is grounded in the foetus's progressive polymorphous change and its suspension outside fixed moral or social value systems. These features were foregrounded in Paul Radin's (1956) seminal study *The Trickster: A Study in American Indian Mythology*, where the author characterises the trickster as an indeterminate and liminal being (x-xi), shapeshifting and pre-social in a distinctly Jungian sense. This latter qualification suggests that the trickster-like foetus operates from a pre-ontic register, that is, from a dimension aligned with dream, imagination, and psychic latency.

Such a framework acquires resonance within the present article's discussion on insomnia and pregnancy, both of which unsettle and open a threshold space between corporeal immediacy and visionary un/consciousness. Radin further underscores the trickster's corporeality, his[8] voracious appetite, his fleshliness, his unabashed immersion in the scatological and the erotic—elements that find a striking correspondence in Erdrich's poetic imagery of hunger, liberated sexuality, and visceral embodiment. These affinities reinforce the interpretation of both the foetus and the Erdrichian Hydra as inheritors of the trickster paradigm. Indeed, as Radin notes, because the trickster belongs to a preconscious realm, it remains "at the mercy of his passions, yet through his actions all

[7] Among Native American poets who address the theme of the trickster, the following stand out: Muskogee Creek Alexander Posey's "Coyote" (*The poems of Alexander Lawrence Posey*, Crane, 1910); Diné Sherwin Bitsui's *Shapeshift* (University of Arizona Press, 2003); Lakota Taté Walker's *Trickster Riots* (Abalone Mountain Press, 2022); Tacey M. Atsitty's "Coyote Sees Himself in Water" (2022).

[8] Although the trickster assumes multiple gendered configurations, Paul Radin consistently approaches and analyses it in masculine terms (1956).

values come into being" (ix). At the moment of the lyric enunciation, Erdrich's Hydra and foetus converge into a shared, fluid identity, both traversing the interstices of the diegetic space through the pre-ontic imagination that sustains the poem's mythopoeic architecture.

The foetus, then, operates as a destabilising force of reality, turning the familiar a threatening presence favoured by the very "doubleness of myth—its combination of strangeness and familiarity" (Doherty 2003, 11). As Roas argues (2022), the figure of the monster subverts "our cognitive and hermeneutic codes" splitting human epistemology into the binary opposition of the Self and the Other. In turn, this division covers the Self's "irrepressible desire for transgression" (106). One must nevertheless remain attentive to the limits of such categorisation, particularly when engaging with decolonial and postcolonial literary traditions. In reading Erdrich's poem, it becomes imperative to interrogate whether the Western construction of the monstruous Other can be uncritically extended to Native American literature, which instead constitutes a generative space for transgressive figures who ceaselessly traverse the boundaries of gender, ethnicity, race, and social position. Among these figures, the trickster exemplifies a mode of resistance that unsettles ontological and epistemic impositions of reality. Within this framework, Erdrich's Hydra resonates with Indigenous epistemologies in which serpentine beings are not demonised but rather revered as protectors, healers, and mediators of spiritual knowledge. On this shapeshifting of humans into animals, Erdrich states that women are

> taught to present a demure face to the world and yet there is a kind of wild energy behind it in many women that is transformational energy, and not only transforming to them but to other people. When, in some poems, it takes the form of becoming an animal, that I feel is a symbolic transformation, the moment when a woman allows herself to act out of her own power. (in Bruchac 1987, 82)

Erdrich's poem exemplifies what Frye (1961) designates as *displacement*, a concept he defines as "the techniques a writer uses to make his story credible, logically motivated or morally acceptable—lifelike, in short" (603). This mechanism serves to enhance the poem's exegetical coherence and credibility, especially within the mythopoeic framework of Erdrich's literary world[9]. In the case of poetry, I argue that it is the author's mythopoeic imagination that reconfigures classical myths—such as the Lernaean Hydra—into contemporary forms. This transformation occurs through the process of "deconstructing [its] time-valued semantic contents" (Karadaş 2007, 216), thereby invigorating these ancient symbols with fresh connotations and meaning. In line with McWeeny, Losada (2022)

[9] J.R.R. Tolkien coins the term "mythopoeic" to refer to a literary form that "has the structure, look and feel of a myth, but is in fact a contemporary creation rather than a story passed down by tradition" (*A Dictionary of Critical Theory*, s.v. "mythopoetic," accessed Sep 3, 2025, https://www.oxfordreference.com/display/10.1093/oi/authority.20110803100220550).

argues that any myth is malleable, therefore acts like flesh, for it does not calcify as a bone, but adapts itself to cultural, religious, anthropological or sociological phenomena as it is converted into literary or artistic subject (178). Through "Hydra," Erdrich reworks the classical Greek myth incorporating it into a bicultural discourse that interlaces Catholic and Anishinaabe cosmologies. It is hardly coincidental that the serpent emerges as a central symbol in *Baptism of Desire*. Allusions to this figure are later shown in Erdrich's non-fiction narratives such as *Books and Island in Ojibwe Country* (2003, 21), where reference is made to the use of *ginebi*'s[10] medicine for ceremonial purposes This reptile, by virtue of its sinuous form, functions as a mediator across boundaries.

So far, there has been scarce criticism around Erdrich's "Hydra." For Kurup (2020), the poem distills "a serpent-like female energy" (95), whereas in the case of Porras Sánchez (2019), it is the foetus inside the lyrical voice's womb which is regarded as the mythological beast (167), "uncoiling" through the woman's flesh (Erdrich 1989, 41). Anyhow, in "Hydra," the creature's liminal role extends to the negotiation of gender, species, and elemental domains such as water, earth, and birth fluids. Indeed, Porras Sánchez, in her article "Hybrid Mythologies: Identity and Heritage in the Poetry of Louise Erdrich," acknowledges Erdrich's pregnant state while writing "Hydra" and interprets the reptilian presence as the lyrical voice's "unborn child identifying it with the serpentine water monster of the Classical tradition" (166). In her account of Erdrich's poem, Porras Sánchez aligns the poetical speaker with Mary at the Nativity, while the serpent's "double helix" (Erdrich 1989, 47) draws associations with the biblical account, as well as with "a possible allusion to the DNA and the X chromosome" (Porras Sánchez 2019, 166). Besides, she interprets the poem's fear of needles as linked to maternal mortality and to Ariadne's myth, as knitting "becomes for Erdrich a new umbilical cord and a metaphor for her literary legacy" (167), thus revealing the evidence that connects the trope of the waiting woman with creation—both biological and artistically speaking.

## 3. Erdrich's Pregnant Dream

Dreams, as Losada contends (2022, 111), are intimate realms suffused with meaning, unfolding either as symbols or allegories; it is for this reason that cultural myth-criticism endeavours to discern the point where myth stands within oneiric accounts. In her memoir *The Blue Jay's Dance: A Birth Year* (1995), Louise Erdrich recounts that during several sequenced pregnancies, she composed lyrical texts especially in nighttime, aroused not to a dreamy pulsion, but to periods of insomnia. According to her, poems were written

[10] The Ojibwe term for *serpent*.

"during the late nights up until the week of birth, and fiction by day.[11] I suppose one could say, pulling in the obvious metaphors, that my work is hormone driven, inscribed in mother's milk, pregnant with itself" (Chavkin and Chavkin 1994, 24). Erdrich's pregnant writing entails, in Berger's (2008) words, "an essentially feminist task" (89), for it questions patriarchal logics on individuality and rationality whilst roots itself in an invisible yet infinite braiding of networks that connect all the maternity wards in the world, simultaneously approaching the universal to the intimate. This, however, intrusion into her lyrical ontology seems necessary to detail the relationship that Erdrich entails with poetry, a genre from which she publicly dissociated herself after the publication of *Original Fire* in 2004. From Erdrich's statement (in Bruchac 1987, 82), one could infer her awareness of poetry as an irrational craft. Indeed, in a conversation around her writing of verse, she stated that "Very little of what happens in poetry is conscious" (82).

Symbolically, night is associated with the deepest, most shadowy dimensions of the unconscious. As Cirlot (2018, 58) observes, there is a constellation of interconnected symbols—moon, rain, fertility, woman, death, serpent—through which the possibility of regeneration emerges, enabling the recovery of what was once thought lost and inaugurating new mythologies. The serpent, recurrent in foundational narratives, consistently embodies the feminine principle of fertility. However, it functions ambivalently as a creative force that is at once earthly and human, and as a figure that Christianity has reinterpreted with negative categories, linking it to carnal sin, eroticism, and their transgressive implications.

It is recognised that parasomnia occurs to a significant extent in pregnant women's sleep behaviour beyond the first trimester, as evidenced by recent literature on sleep and gravidity (Mancuso et al. 2008; Nowakowski et al. 2014; Scarpelli et al. 2025). By parasomnia, I refer to an abnormality of sleep conduct which, in the words of Fariba and Radi (2023), encompasses a spectrum of sleep disruptions including nightmares, which manifest themselves "during the second half of the sleep cycle, with recollection intact, upon awakening." Erdrich's sleep phenomenology, as portrayed in the former interview, corresponds to the realm of insomnia, and therefore cannot be considered an episode of parasomnia. Still, the uncanny dreamy experience the poet displays through "Hydra," marked by terror images of deglutition at birth[12] ("The hinged mouth swings wide at

[11] Aimee Berger, who has studied Louise Erdrich's fiction, asserts that "Mothers throughout Erdrich's fiction are located in the troubled interstice of power and powerlessness, placed there by circumstances out of their control, unable to protect their children or themselves from encroaching threats or erasure, and so left with few choices about how or even whether to mother, though it is easy to ignore this context and focus on individual mothers as blameworthy, as some critics have done" (2008, 92–93).

[12] Regarding the explicit description of childbirth in contemporary literature, special mention should be made of Mina Loy's poem "Parturition," published in 1913 in the New York magazine *The Trend*. The text,

birth, the dark / peristalsis, the great swallowing begins" [Erdrich 1989, 41]), fears of mortality[13] ("If I finally learned to crochet / and began the world's longest scarf, / my need to perfect myself, my legacy. / If I died at the needles…" [Erdrich 1989, 46]), obsessive thoughts ("I do not want to sleep. / I do not want to be fed through the lips. / I do not want the harrow of need to pass over my body. / I do not want my children to crave me" [Erdrich 1989, 43]) and scenes of bleeding ("I tear the hook from my mouth. / I bleed from the lips, the gapped / flesh. I take up the carving knife, / and swim" [Erdrich 1989, 44]) are frequently found in pregnant nightmares due to hormonal fluctuations, physiological discomforts, and heightened anxiety (Scarpelli et al. 2024, 859). The lyrical subject's oneiric suffocation, thus, would be a product of the heightened susceptibility of women to insomnia and sleep disorders during hormonal transitions. According to Nowakowski et al. (2014), "During the third trimester there is an increase in sleep disruptions with typically 3–5 awakenings per night [and] more disturbed dreams," together with an augmentation of "disturbed sleep at levels consistent with a diagnosis of insomnia disorder" (2–5).

"Hydra" conjures the inner convulsions of the serpent/foetus, dramatizing the flesh's malleability and porousness. Anatomical references proliferate, intertwining the snake's tail and spine with the maternal body's bones and mouth. Allusions to parturition are equally inscribed alongside visceral images of "the dark peristalsis," the "swallowing, the hasp of hunger opening" and the "iron knocker" (41)—figures whose forcefulness radiates both ferocity and hostility. These corporeal motifs crystallise the un/familiar sensations engendered by the foetus's movements within the woman's body, at once intimate and alien. The poem's rhetorical architecture relies on anaphora, which orchestrates an enumeration of terms that weave together water, darkness, and death; their severity amplified by stichomythia: "The boat, rocking at the quarter moon. / The innocent, recovered in a sling of holes. / The drowned, pumped and jacketed. / The dead, waking to the wild, dark laughter" (41). Such incantatory repetition accentuates the instability of the liminal threshold where the lyrical voice hovers.

The poem's opening passages oscillate between waking and dreaming, positioning the voice along the edges of cognition. This dynamic establishes a tension between extradiegetic and intradiegetic frames,[14] a division that grows sharper as the monologue

which places at the centre of its discourse the agonising overflow of the parturient woman and the viscosity of the physiological act, constituted both a thematic and formal rupture in gender discourse concerning the role of woman as procreator.

[13] In *The Blue Jay's Dance*, Louise Erdrich delves into this and writes: "What the body remembers of birth it anticipates as death" (1995: 105).

[14] For further development on the in-betweenness of extra/intradiegetic planes and the reverie state, see Monzón Blasco 2026.

develops. Within the nocturnal space of the poem, time is suspended, rendered as a paralysis in which the boundaries separating dream from cognition collapse. On this verge, consciousness articulates a radical refusal of nourishment and desire, again asserted by stichomythia: "I do not want to sleep. / I do not want to be fed through the lips. / I do not want the harrow of need to pass over my body. / I do not want my children to crave me" (43). The poem appears punctuated by fragments of seemingly disjunctive imagery, assembled in a jagged succession that recurs across its beginning, middle, and end. The early sequences dwell on swallowing, viscera, and the wet mechanics of the body, frequently intertwined with ignition aesthetics: "I saw gasoline leaking the corners of a woman's eyes" (41). Here, the semantic field of flesh and water enfolds "eyes," "mouth," "swallowing," "drowning, ice," and the rocking of a boat—the latter being a resonant symbol within Erdrich's maternal writing. A further dimension emerges in the poem's invocation of Gnosticism, foreshown as a "sign of eternity" (42). Eternity is embodied in the figure eight, presided over by Abraxas, "the perfect word" (42), which surfaces in images of the quarter moon and the hour of the wolf. The monologue's progression mirrors the movement of the night itself, casting pregnancy as a temporal metaphor: an entire gestational period condensed into a single night, or more precisely, into an interval between reverie and insomnia.

Apocryphal traditions spur from the serpent, as Stirrup (2010, 58) has noted, drawing intertextual connections to *The Other Bible.* Indeed, the reference to Abraxas unfolds a taste of the underworld where the sinuous Hydra belongs, and this, in the poem, is sustained by diction that recalls the obscurity of deep waters, equated to the woman's womb. Verbs like "uncoiling," "swings," "beating," "swallowing," "leaking," and "rocking" (Erdrich 1989: 42–43) reproduce the foetus's contorted movements, but simultaneously replicate actions far removed from the graceful and balanced world of celestial spheres. Likewise, past participles such as "drowned, pumped and jacketed," noun phrases like "dark laughter," "hinged mouth," and "crushed stalks" (41) warn the reader about the Gnostic atmosphere in which Abraxas seeks shelter. The term, in Erdrich's (1989) words, "is a name containing Greek letters which as numerals amount to 365" (48). Its mysticism renders the figure a mysterious source, making it to be regarded as "the Supreme Deity, the source of mind and world" (48), as a liminal being "with the head of a cock or lion, a human body, and serpents as legs" (48). Abraxas, then, suggests infinity, timelessness and brilliance. The Hydra, with its sinuous movement, stands as a mediator between matter and form, being the feminine/masculine, human/animal, water/earth. Moreover, its Gnostic symbolism is emphasised by the classical figure of the snake as a wisdom provider, holding positive connotations, as opposed to the Biblical

interpretation. In his studies on Gnosticism, Bowker (1996) notes that "The sect considers the Serpent, who seduced Eve with 'knowledge', to be a symbol of good" (359).[15]

The poem entwines the passage of time with Christian imagery, casting pregnancy within a framework of both sacred and violent symbolism. Early references evoke the Nativity, as when the reader is reminded that at "Christmas, the angel strikes the earth" (Erdrich 1989, 42) and the child is figured as baby Jesus "delivered in its garment of wax, / and his mother's blood / darkens the straw" (42). Yet this sanctified vision soon dims, because as the night progresses—and with it, gravidity—, the foetus becomes not the infant redeemer but "Christ Tortured" (44), a prefiguration of mortal suffering rather than immortal salvation. Temporal shifts further intensify the imagery. At the turning of the year, when "the snake shifts its coils, / arranging the dark profusion" (42), the foetus stirs within the womb, its movements aligning human gestation with serpentine vitality. This interlacing of serpent and child reinforces the visceral bond of flesh between mother and her unborn creature.

Time, marked by "the moon's silvers" (43), carries the speaker towards a threshold where she walks alongside the Hydra "in the longer spears of light" (43), a journey that merges cyclical temporality with mythic dread. The serpent figure recurs obsessively throughout the poem, whether glimpsed as a creature flying "from a rock" (42), glimmering with "bronze eyes" (43), or embodied in the child itself. The unborn being bears its uncanny presence most forcefully when "the child is whipped toward the place of skulls" (43), an allusion to Golgotha that anticipates both crucifixion and birth. In this same vision, delivery becomes a violent extraction: the infant is imagined as pulled "out by the tail" (44), a grotesque[16] inversion of natural birth. The snake becomes even more visceral when envisioned as "uncoiling from the bound / woman's arms, from the throat / like a necklace of shorn flesh" (45), merging maternal body and serpentine threat in a single image of uncanny release. Such scenes of anticipated parturition are conveyed through a diction steeped in savagery and visceral pain, where the act of birth is rendered not as moment of creation alone, but as a brutal, almost primal ordeal etched in language. The speaker proclaims: "I tear the hook from my mouth. / I bleed from the lips, the gapped /

[15] It is of relevance to note that for the Gnostics, the search for knowledge implied a mystic philosophy based on the search for sex. To this, Bowker (1996) adds that "what is unknowable through reason may be knowable through the mystique of organ," meaning that "knowledge and pleasure" are "simultaneously communicated by penetrative sex" (359). In relation to Erdrich's poetry, Stirrup (2010) argues that there exists a "connection between woman and death, where sex is frequently cast as a (self-) destructive act and birth repeatedly echoed in death" (50).

[16] The grotesque, following Russo's (1994) adaptation of Kristeva, marks the female body as secretive, protruding, and uncanny (8). Extending Beltrán Almería's view (2018), the grotesque emerges in dreams and delirium through tricksters, monsters, hybrids, or reptiles, evoking mythical or satirical excess, feasting, and excretion, as exemplified in Erdrich's imaginative realms.

flesh. I take up the carving knife, / and swim" (44). Here, the language dissolves childbirth, wounding, and ritual sacrifice into one searing act. The womb itself—described as "the darker hole" (44)—becomes both a prison and a holy space, with its "sacred monotony" (44) adapting as time advances.

In the closing vision, mother and foetus are bound in temporal flux: "Here we are riding the snake, / stuck on each radiant spine, as the days / shorten towards the equinox" (44). The imagery thus fuses Christian suffering, mythological terror, and the inexorable progression of time, casting birth as a cosmic drama written on the body. I argue that the crucial motif in the poem is the flesh-bond between mother and child, considering McWeeny's (2014) concept of flesh and visceral intracorporeal exchange, in the sense that flesh is manifested as an "apt metaphor for signifying the lived ambiguity of relational embodiment" which in the case of the poem "is animated by seemingly contradictory aspects of experience like passivity and activity and objectification and resistance at the same time" (279). This physical intimacy simultaneously signals alienation from the external world and an emergent recognition of female power. The poetic persona articulates this by claiming: "No woman to guide us back into her body / the same way we left" (Erdrich 1989, 45). The line asserts both the impossibility of return and the authority of the maternal body as the site of origin, one that cannot be retraced or reversed. As the imminent moment of childbirth looms, the Hydra shifts into a

> … decorative experiment,
> feeding on every other species.
> Hydra, multifarious source
> of harm. Lucent, ineradicable.
> Serpent of the mouth clasped to tail,
> of the benzene[17] vision. Serpent of the half gender,
> longing to join its opposite, in tenderness
> to perfect the old brutalized animal. (45)

The reader understands how the mythological beast is reconfigured: it no longer is a monstrous threat, but becomes a liminal figure gesturing towards hybridity, tenderness, and reconciliation. The Hydra is thus rewritten as an emblem of generative possibility, a new species emerging at the edge of birth—a mythopoetic plasticity that privileges transformation over destruction. As the reverie/insomnia lapse reaches its climax, the maternal voice recalls how mother and child "rocked ourselves to sleep" (45), a moment that tempers the dread of the unknown with intimacy and protection. The conclusion of the

[17] References to the German biochemist August Kekulé von Stradonitz appear in Erdrich's poem, invoking his legendary dream-induced revelation of the ring structure of benzene with the help of a dream in which he saw a snake swallowing its tail" (Erdrich 1989, 48). This symbolic image not only underscores the motif of cyclical consumption but also reinforces the recurring semantic field of ingestion, visceral disgust and the presence of bodily fluids, all of which permeate the poem's corporeal and psychological landscape.

dreamscape is saturated with flashes of memory, fragments from the lyrical eye/I's past that return in brief illuminations, just as at the poem's opening. These discontinuous images weave together an atmosphere in which the terror of death at birth is counterbalanced by sensitivity, shielding both mother and foetus within a fragile yet resilient bond.

In this oscillation between fear[18] and comfort, the text expands outward from private experience into what can be described as planetary consciousness, situating personal gestation within broader cycles of time, myth, and memory. Ultimately, the serpent—at once classical Hydra, Christian tempter, and personal emblem—emerges as the poem's central force, its presence collapsing boundaries between the intimate and the cosmic, the bodily, the creative, and the textual. When the poetic persona declares, "Snake of hard hours, you are my poetry" (47), the creature ceases to be merely adversarial. It becomes a figure of endurance, a companion through hardship, and a symbol of creativity itself. The closing lines—"Who cares if you whisper? … Who cares / if the fruit is luscious? Your place / is at my ear" (47)—reject traditional Eurocentric narratives of temptation and sin. Instead, they relocate the serpent as a partner in dialogue, an interlocutor that whispers not deceit but inspiration. In this final gesture, mother and child, beast and human, dream and consciousness dissolve. The serpent, once a harbinger of harm, is reimagined as the very condition of poetic utterance and an omen of new beginnings.

## 4. Conclusions

As this study upholds, Louise Erdrich's poetry is sustained by the negotiation of decolonial and feminist revisions of Classical myths. In *Baptism of Desire*, "the mythic, the ordinary, and the mystic are all present" (Kurup 2020, 95). For its part, "Hydra" stands as a syncretic totem where multiple genealogies converge: the Greek monster, the Christian allegory, the Gnostic serpent, and the Ojibwe *ginebig*. By reworking the Hydra myth within her own bicultural matrix, Erdrich not only expands the symbolic reach of Native American poetry but also destabilises Eurocentric mythography. Taken together, the Hydra's textual history underscores its adaptability across cultural horizons. From Hesiod's hybrid monster to the moralised allegories of medieval bestiaries; from Gnostic serpents to Erdrich's variant, the Hydra demonstrates to bear mythopoetic plasticity, for each iteration reveals less about a fixed creature and more about the symbolic needs of the culture that reinterprets it. As Erdrich's poem shows, the monster can be reappropriated not as an emblem of vice or sin but as a liminal mediator of creativity, maternity, and cultural

[18] In *The Wisdom of the Serpent: The Myths of Death, Rebirth, and Resurrection* (1990), a Jungian-centred analysis on the symbol of the snake, Joseph L. Henderson analyses the fear of death provoked by the presence of this reptile, whereas Maud Oakes compares Occidental and Oriental interpretations based on the serpent's death and rebirth as inherent cycles of nature.

hybridity. This shift exemplifies the capacity of Native American poets to reclaim and reconfigure classical myths within frameworks that highlight intersectional feminist and intercultural perspectives.

"Hydra" is a sprawling, visionary poem that delves into the alchemical crucible of pregnancy and creativity, refracted through the classical, shape-shifting symbol of the water snake. Through a serpentine and oneiric diction and syntax, the poem binds the intimate to the archetypal, confronting both divinity and flesh with a fierce, ecstatic defiance. In conjuring a hallucinatory, liminal landscape, the lyrical voice reimagines the Hydra not as a monstrous aberration, but as an emblem of biological and artistic creativity, as well as feminine sovereignty, being both a mythic cipher and a metaphor for the writing act itself. Layered in syncretic meanings and historical echoes, the poem dissolves binaries between self and other, sacred and profane, culminating in the spectral figure of the bearer-Madonna: a mother-deity who carries within her womb not merely a child, but a vast, unresolved potential—divine, unruly, and wholly her own.

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