

# The Body's Life in Fiction: An Analysis of Alison in Mary Gaitskill's novel *Veronica* Through the Lens of Continuum Movement

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## Personal Note:

*I reentered the world of academia in my mid-fifties to pursue an MFA degree in Creative Writing. Previously, I had a twenty-five year career as a practitioner and teacher in the alternative healing arts. I was trained and certified in many body and energy work modalities and movement therapies. Ultimately, I developed my own method called Powers Movement, an offshoot of Continuum Movement, the technique I described in the paper.*



*I wanted my MFA senior lecture and thesis to reflect my extensive background and experience in the somatic arts. When I read Mary Gaitskill's novel, **Veronica**, I saw a way to juxtapose an academic, typically dry and disembodied, literary analysis of the protagonist, Alison, with a fluid body paradigm as the source of her history, behavior and motivation. It is through Alison's body story that we see how she is able to find true sensuality, resonance and empathy as the novel progresses.*

*In the future, I plan to write more literary critiques and reviews from the same somatic perspective that I used with 'Veronica.'*

Having worked as a Continuum Movement practitioner for the past 15 years, I will apply my extensive knowledge and experience of the body and Continuum, a type of movement therapy, as a lens through which to analyze the character of Alison, the protagonist in Mary Gaitskill's novel, *Veronica*.

Real and imagined bodies can be read biologically, genetically and culturally. These levels of seeing go beyond the useful but limiting body language theories that describe physical gestures, such as crossing one's arms or legs in a social situation, and assign corresponding psychological states of mind to such postures. A more complex way of examining body shape is to follow the process of an embryo developing in the womb and to note if a body has kept the fluid integrity of its basic human blueprint. Arms begin as buds that sprout from the cervical spine, legs from the sacrum. As they grow, limbs extend from these places of origin. A mature human body's limbs can appear fluid or tight. Do arms and shoulders hang loosely from the spine or are they scrunched up into the neck? Do legs move easily or are they pulled up into the pelvis and groin creating a stiff gait?

During my studies, one of my instructors asked me to go to a shopping mall, pick out various people and unobtrusively walk behind each one for a time and try to imitate how they walked. I was to report what sensations, thoughts and emotions I noticed when I configured myself to the person walking in front of me. Did I feel tense or easy in my body? Did my mood change as my body shifted? Walking behind two or more members of a family was particularly enlightening. Invariably, their movements were almost identical to one another: the same shoulder held higher than the other, the same leg twisted slightly inward, the head leaning to the right, the same level of tension held in exactly the same way. If I followed Alison or any fictive character around a shopping mall, what would I discover?

The somatic practice of Continuum Movement is the basis of my inquiry into the character of Alison in the novel *Veronica*. Continuum Movement explores internal as well as external movement, considers hereditary and cultural influences, but most importantly and atypically uses the biological formative process as its primary basis for viewing the body. Movement is not something we do but who we are. In Continuum Movement the fluid substance of the body is valued rather than a static model or form. I am interested in analyzing character from a fictional genetic and cultural standpoint using this fluid perspective as the underlying foundation for my interpretation.

Continuum Movement was founded in New York City in 1967 by Emilie Conrad, who realizing that all life is shaped by water identified the wave motion as the essential, unifying movement that is common to all life forms and lies beneath cultural influence. The fluid interior of our body moves in the way energy moves through space. She recognized wave motion as the universal access code to all life.

Human form is created in a fluid flow. In *Sensitive Chaos: The Creation of Flowing Forms in Water and Air*, engineer Theodor Schwenk (1962) compares fluid flow in nature to its movement in animal and man. He writes:

[there is no differentiation] between water as it appears in nature and the fluids within living organisms... together earth, plant world and atmosphere form a single great organism, in which water streams like living blood. What is here spread out over a large space, animal and man have within themselves. What in the plant world is spread in circulation over the face of the whole earth is in them enclosed in a small space, where it moves in the same rhythms and according to the same laws as does the water outside them in nature. (pp. 11, 14)

All forms of life on this planet have developed through the movement of water. One can see the impressions of spiraling water in markings and formations of rock and sand and in the curving shapes in plant life. Our own spiraling blood vessels, branching nervous system, and the shapes of our bones and organs all reflect the fluid ancestry of the human body. We are water living on land. The body, in Continuum, is considered to be movement that has temporarily stabilized in form in order to facilitate functions needed to survive.

Continuum Movement is based on the understanding of the body as on ongoing expression of four billion years of planetary process. It is a practice of remembering and becoming like water. The marine biologist Rachel Carson (1989) describes this heritage in her book, *The Sea Around Us*.

When they went ashore the animals that took up a land life carried with them a part of the sea in their bodies, a heritage which they passed on to their children and which even today links each land animal with its origin in the ancient sea... And as life itself began in the sea, so each of us begins his individual life in a miniature ocean within his mother's womb, and in the stages of his embryonic development repeats the steps by which his race evolved, from gill-breathing inhabitants of a water world to creatures able to live on land (pp.13-14).

Human beings shape themselves to function and survive in accordance with their environment. Consider how our occupational choice shapes us. The office worker, construction worker, athlete, waiter, or fashion model (Alison's profession) must conform to a particular body configuration in order to do their job. The problem is that without a way to stimulate fluidity in the body, our tissue becomes stuck in one shape. A writer's upper body stays hunched long after she has left the computer. Carpal tunnel syndrome is a common complaint. The body reflects its most habitual activity. When one engages in other kinds of movement, such as working out at a gym, the prominent body shape is the one that exercises, which reinforces the fixed pattern. One's thinking and identity will also be affected by how the body is shaped. How we move is how we think. Schwenk (1962) describes:

The activity of thinking is essentially an expression of flowing movement. Every idea like every organic form arises in a process of flow, until the movement congeals into a form. Therefore, we speak of a capacity to think fluently when someone is skillfully able to carry out this creation of form in thought...(p.96).

From a Continuum perspective, a body that is compartmentalized, not in communication with itself, or holding an armored, rigid stance, will reflect the same qualities in social interactions. Consider the muscle-bound weight lifter, whose body is so tight his movements are restricted. His ability to turn freely from side to side is

diminished. His interactions with the world are also restricted, bound and armored. In our quest to have the perfect body, have we bought into the marketing message from the fashion industry to strive for a mechanical body image that includes buns and abs of steel? In a recent interview with Nancy Galeota-Wozny (2001) for the *Contact Quarterly*, Conrad (in Becker, 2005) talked about the industrialization of the body.

... we have been colonized by the industrial revolution as it has invaded our biosystem by enforcing mechanical and repetitive movement... We accept these reductive movements, not aware of their limitations. The industrialization of the body... has created a speed that is not in keeping with the tides of a biosystem, causing, in my view, an unbelievable degree of dissociation and stress... (pp. 26-27).

Continuum Movement was developed, in part, as a response to the profound dissociation from the body in western culture. As early as 1830, Alexis de Tocqueville (in Becker, 2005) described the danger of requiring humans to engage in repetitive activity:

What can be expected of a man who has spent twenty years of his life in making heads for pins? When a workman has spent a considerable portion of his existence in this manner, his thoughts are forever set upon the object of his daily toil; his body has contracted certain fixed habits, which it can never shake off: in a word, he no longer belongs to himself, but to the calling which he has chosen. In proportion as the principle of the division of labor is more extensively applied, the workman becomes more weak, more narrow-minded, and more dependent. The art advances and the artisan recedes (p.15).

In the practice of Continuum Movement, diverse elements of breath, sound, and fluid movements are combined to initiate internal wave motions, which help to dissolve patterned physical forms and overly stabilized identities. Our bodies need the nourishment that's available in random spiraling movements, much like water meandering through a river accumulates nutrient-rich minerals as it flows over rock and filters through soil. In a film interview, Conrad (In Becker, 2005) asserts,

Probably the most important factor in our own humanness is the activation of our fluid. It is so obvious that if you are 70 percent fluid there must be a reason why that is the case (pp. 61-61).

The inquiry in Continuum Movement is on the actual fluid substance of which the body is made. The practice seeks to consciously replicate the movement of cells, which dissolve their boundaries when nourishment is needed, then congeal again, functioning in a continual state of dissolution and re-forming.

A human being develops embryonically and genetically in a watery world of possibility and is born into a specific and demanding familial and cultural milieu, which becomes part of one's construction, along with gravitational force, air substance and other requirements of the planet that determine how one will have to breath and move in order to live and navigate in the environment. The mixture of biology, genetics, culture and atmosphere determines how a person inhabits their body: how they move through life physically and emotionally, how they relate to others, who they love, what needs and desires they attempt to fulfill and what conflicts they try to overcome.

A writer of fiction usually thinks about a character's desires and conflicts from a psychological point of view. In my analysis of Alison I will go in a different direction and address how her imagined biology, genetics and culture together are reflected in her body, her thinking and the choices she makes.

Viewing Gaitskill's novel, *Veronica*, through the paradigm of Continuum Movement helps us focus on unmet biological needs and attendant suffering. Underneath the character's angst is a longing for ancestral, embryonic remembrance and embodiment. If, as writers and readers, we include this aspect of a character as we follow them in their

attempts to get their needs met, our experience will be enriched. And we will feel more aware of our own bodies.

Continuum Movement strives to give people an experience of themselves as biological organism, without the cultural trappings of a societal role, specific gender of identity.

Alison's parents are inadequate and cannot give her the nurturing she needs. For years, Alison has watched her father futilely attempt to express his feelings by trying to signal them to people through songs. He is longing for biological connection, which he attempts to find through music.

My father used to make lists of his favorite popular songs, ranked in order of preference. These lists were very nuanced, and they changed every few years. He'd walk around with the list in his hand, explaining why Jo GI. Jo Stafford was ranked just above Doris Day, why Charles Trenet topped Nat King Cole&It was his way of showing people things about him that were too private to say directly. I remember being there once when he was playing the songs for some men he worked with, talking excitedly about the music. He didn't realize his signals could not be heard, that the men were looking at him strangely... Eventually, he gave up, and there were few visitors. He was just by himself, trying to keep his secret and tender feelings alive through these same old songs (Gaitskill, 2005:15- 16).

Alison's father is trying to uphold cultural values of self-control and emotional discipline yet he needs desperately to find an expression for his feelings. Alison is drawn to modeling, which also requires self-control, emotional distance and dissociation of mind, body and emotions. She recalls:

I remember once seeing a picture of [a model]... who was shot so close-up, you could barely see what she was

wearing... her lipstick was smeared and a boy mussed her hair as he pressed a joint to her open dry lips. Her eyes rolled unevenly in her head, so that one stared blankly at the camera and the other shimmered near the top of her eyelid... I tore her picture out of the magazine and tacked it up on the wall of my room. I didn't understand why I liked it... these poses were like closed doors I couldn't open, and this one was, too. Except that you could hear muffled sounds coming from behind it, voices, footsteps, music (pp. 31-32).

As a teenager Alison runs away from home. "I wanted something to happen, but I didn't know what. I didn't have the ambition to be an important person or a star. My ambition was to live like music" (p.30). Alison wants to live like music, as her father, hidden safely behind songs. During her first modeling photo shoot, music plays while she's posing. "I didn't know how to pose, but it didn't matter; the music was like a big red flower you could disappear into... I was going to be a model and make money walking around inside songs everybody knew" (p.37).

Biologically, Alison is longing for an organismic connection. In addition, she is carrying the weight of familial and genetic influence. She's also trapped in a culture that demands women be attractive, particularly pretty women. Hiding behind beauty and modeling poses is encouraged. In *Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture, and the Body*, Susan Bordo (2001) suggests that certain cultural rituals that objectify the female promote dissociation in women for the purpose of maintaining a cultural status quo.

Through the exacting and normalizing disciplines of diets, makeup, and dresscentral organizing principles of time and space in the day of many women, we are rendered socially oriented and more centripetally focused on self-modification. Through these disciplines, we continue to memorize on our bodies the feel and conviction of



lack, of insufficiency, of never being good enough. (p.2363)

Alison's sexual encounters are dissociative. She loses herself; her body seems to disappear. In Gaitskill (2005), she confesses:

Fucking Gregory Carson was like falling down the rabbit hole and seeing things flying by without knowing what they meant. Except I *was* the rabbit hole at the same time, and he was stuffing things down it like crazy, just throwing everything in, like he couldn't get rid of it fast enough. And I could take it all. &His face looked like he was saying, Remember this when they're taking your picture. Remember *this*. Like he was stuffing me full of him so that any picture of me would be a picture of him, too, because people who looked would see him staring out of my eyes (p.40)

The tone of Gaitskill's language is cool, sharp, psychologically acute and unsentimental. The writing, which for the most part echoes the sustained interiority of Alison's voice, seems to jab at one's chest in a staccato rhythm, mirroring how Alison views the people in her world. She discloses, "I was distracted by a man in a suit coming toward me with a bouquet of roses... His lips made me think of a spider drinking blood with pure blank bliss" (p.59).

The first time Alison's mother looks at her daughter's modeling pictures in Paris fashion magazines she feels pride, but Gaitskill (2005) only lets us see that for a moment.

There was love in her look, but with such jealousy mixed in that the feelings became quickly slurred. It was what my mother gave me, so I took it and I gave it back; I reveled in her jealousy as she reveled in my vanity. Reveling and rageful, we went between sleep and

dreams right there in the dining room.  
(p.161)

Her mother's response points to how Alison's tough exterior developed under the pervasive influence of competition and jealousy. By the time Alison meets Veronica she is aggressive, hard and unsympathetic. Gaitskill (2005) wrote:

Veronica asked me how I got into modeling, and I said, By fucking a nobody catalog agent who grabbed my crotch. I said it with disdainlike I didn't have to be embarrassed or make up something nice, because Veronica was nobodylike why should I care if an ant could see up my dress? Except I didn't notice my disdain; it was habitual by then (p.39).

Conrad (in Becker, 2005) addresses the issue of habitual patterns and responses from the paradigm of Continuum Movement: We exist, but we're not thriving. Defenses and adaptive strategies developed in early life become entrenched within our systems, functioning like an aberrant DNA.

Habitual ways of functioning signal a high level of rigidity, mass and density in the body. Disconnection from one's biological fluid origins cuts off empathy and emotion and impedes access to bio-intelligence. Alison's language, actions and thoughts reflect her base level of sensate responsiveness. In his book, *Embryogenesis: Species, Gender, and Identity*, ethnographer and cultural historian, Grossinger (2000) discusses the inherent danger of empathetic disconnection.

The only ways kids can invade their school with guns, shooting bullets into other students, is if they don't feel what they are doing, if they do not experience the event as real. As industrialized, computerized, heroin and fantasy intelligences replace real cell-chanted bodies, all sorts of new crimes against the body-mind arise These are not intentionally sadistic. The harm being done doesn't even resonate. When

there is no longer empathic resonance  
one can do anything. The body is a  
dream. (p.625)

Alison meets Veronica at a temp job in Manhattan. "Veronica is thirty-seven with a plump body and bleached blonde hair. She wore tailored suits in mannish plaids with matching bow ties, bright red lipstick, false red fingernails and mascara that gathered in intense beads on the end of her eyelashes" (p.12). And Veronica has AIDS. "When I knew Veronica, I was healthy and beautiful and I thought I was so great for being friends with somebody who was ugly and sick (p.24)." At the time of their meeting, Alison is twenty-one years old. Her modeling career is waning. She's armored, rigid and cynical in her interactions with people. She carries the scars of having lived the high-speed, destructive, disembodied life of glamour. In *Gaitskill*, one reads:

I thought of a photographer who habitually held his arrogant head turned up and away from his body as if pretending it wasn't there... I [thought] of myself presenting my body without bodily reality, my face exaggerated by makeup and artificial feeling, suspended forever on an imaginary brink, eyes dimmed and looking at nothing. (p.166)

When Alison tells Veronica with habitual disdain how she became a model by fucking a nobody catalog agent, Alison expects a stinging response, but when she [Veronica] talked, her voice was kind.

Every pretty girl has a story like that, hon," she said. I had that prettiness, too. I have those stories... Of course, you're a lot prettier than I was... you'd have won the contest hands down! But prettiness is always about pleasing people. When you stop being pretty, you don't have to do that anymore. I don't have to do that anymore. It's my show now. [Alison says] I wasn't trying to please anyone... No? [asks Veronica] She stubbed out her cigarette in a bright yellow ashtray. What

were you trying to do? (39-40)

This moment of resonance between Alison and Veronica opens the door for their unlikely friendship to develop. Veronica sees and responds to Alison with kindness and recognition, which cuts through some of Alison's defenses.

With her weird clothes, plump body, badly bleached hair and loud voice, the aging and sick Veronica doesn't fit Alison's picture of the right kind of friend, yet: [Veronica] put down her Styrofoam cup. The stirring coffee shone with oils from her lipstick. The side of the cup was marked with the impress of her lower lip. "For a strange moment, I wanted to take her cup and kiss it, covering her mark with mine. Alison surprises herself and Veronica when she blurts out, Do you want to go out for a drink?" Veronica declines, "Thanks, hon, but I can't. I've got an appointment. Maybe another time" (p.145). Alison doesn't give up. She reaches out again, takes a bigger risk. Gaitskill (2005) proceeds:

Maybe we could go see a movie? I trembled in my extended position, but I held it. She [Veronica] dropped her eyes. She said, That would be lovely, but her voice hesitated, as if her foot had halted midstep while her body veered in another direction. The moment was fragile and uncomfortable, and it united us as if by touch. Veronica raised her eyes. I could do it this week? (p.145)

What is it that unites them so strongly? They are both afraid to step out of their habitual roles, but they yearn for something they don't have, have never had. The touch they feel is recognition of an opportunity for biological connection. I could feel Veronica smile before I saw it. By the end of the movie, [Veronica's] feelings, grown too broad for words, were strong enough that I could feel them running, sinking, rising, and again running in an ardent fluxing pattern. Then we went to have ice cream (p.147).

They continue to go to the movies together. Sometimes Alison becomes aware, through the eyes of others, how odd, she and Veronica appear. Gaitskill (2005) elaborates:

We went to the movies again the next week and several weeks after that. If we could sit alone in an isolated row, we talked our way through the story. If we had to sit where others could hear us, we didn't. Either way, we left the theatre feeling like we'd been talking in tongues. Sometimes I would see men look at me, and at her, then withdraw their eyes in confusion. Sometimes their confusion would confuse me; (p.148)

As their friendship grows and Veronica's illness progresses, each of them, confronted with biology in such a base, stark, and painful way, struggle with how to find deep meaning and love in the unfamiliar land of the body. Finding this connection is the purpose of their friendship. It is through body memory that Alison is able to have intimate and empathetic feelings for Veronica. Gaitskill (2005) voiced out:

Veronica invited me to sleep over. She gave me a flannel nightgown imprinted with violets and green ribbons. The print was faded from many washings and there was ragged hole in one elbow; it was so unlike Veronica to own such a decrepit item that I thought it must be from her childhood. As I slipped it over my head in the bathroom, I inhaled deeply, imagining ghost scents wafting off the gown. Childhood smells; silken armpit, back of the neck, fragrant perfect foot. Adolescence stronger, more pungent, heavy with spray-can deodorant, then secretly, defiantly rank. An adult snow cloud of soap and bleach, and the ghost still whispering through it. The gown was tight across my shoulders; its sleeves went just past my elbow and its hem just past my knees. I smoothed it lovingly and left the bathroom, ready to get in bed and put my arms around Veronica; I imagined

us together in our flannels, cuddling until we woke. But as soon as we lay down, she said, "Good night," and turned on her side (p.171).

Veronica cannot tolerate this level of closeness. Alison and Veronica struggle in their own ways, wanting both nourishment and distance from each other. Toward the end of Veronica's life, Gaitskill (2005) verbalizes Alison's mixed feelings.

Sometimes I had contempt and disgust for Veronica. It would come on me as I lay alone in bed, drowsy but unable to sleep. I would picture her with one of her false smiles or arranging her cat coasters or adjusting her jaunty bow tie, and I would fill with scorn. I didn't try to fight it. I let it snort and root. Why had she been involved with someone like Duncan [Veronica's bisexual lover who gave her AIDS] anyway? She wanted to be a victim. Probably she even wanted to die— People like Veronica dragged everyone down; it was paralyzing to be confronted with such pain. (p.185)

Yet this level of bodily breakdown and pain is the catalyst that allows them to feel love and friendship. They become more human. Gaitskill (2005) makes Alison reflect: "I sank down into darkness and lived among the demons for a long, long time. I was saved by another demon, who looked on me with pity and so became human again. And because I pitied her in turn, I was allowed to become human, too" (p.227).

The last time Alison sees Veronica alive she rubs Veronica's breastbone, the bone that protects the heart. With this gesture, both their hearts open. Alison grows a larger fluid body that merges with the body of Veronica. Gaitskill (2005) elaborates:

I put my hand on her breastbone. I felt her subtly respond. Shyly, I rubbed her. I rubbed Veronica's chest and then I left.

I said, 'Call me if anything happens,' and she walked me to the door. I hugged and she walked me to the door. I hugged her and she said, "Wait a minute, hon." She took a ring off her finger and gave it to me. She put it on my finger. She squeezed my hand. She said, "Good-bye, sweetheart." And she smiled. I remember rubbing the small bones in the center of Veronica's chest. I remember her surprise at being touched that way, the slight shift in her facial expression as if feelings of love and friendship had been awakened by the intimate touch. ...I never should've touched her like that and then turned around and left, leaving her chest opened and defenseless against the feelings that might come into it... feelings of love and friendship left unrequited once more. (pp.212-216)

The structure of the novel, *Veronica*, begins and ends with one day in Alison's present life. Through Gailtskill's (2005) use of internal voice, Alison relives and reflects on the past twenty-five years. She's almost fifty years old and oblivious to fashion. She's broke, without health insurance and suffering with symptoms of Hepatitis C: fatigue, muscle and joint pain, nausea, vomiting and loss of appetite.

Now I'm ugly and sick. I don't know how long I've had hepatitis, probably about fifteen years. Sometimes I'm scared, sometimes I feel like I'm being punished for something, sometimes I feel like I'll be okay. Right now, I'm just glad I don't have to deal with a beautiful girl telling me I have to learn to love myself. (p.25)

Alison remembers telling Veronica she needed to love herself. Now, Alison works as a cleaning woman in the office of John, a photographer friend who used to take modeling pictures of her. "John looks at me and sees a beautiful girl in a ruined face. It's broken with age and pain coming through the cracks... we're not going to fuck, but

it's still in my voice, sex and warm arms mixed with hurt and ugliness" (pp.35-36). Ironically, Hepatitis C has made Alison aware of her body. There are no more images to uphold, nothing to prove, no identity to maintain. Alison takes a pain pill for her aching shoulder, lights a cigarette, cleans the bathroom mirror and tells her life story. Through her friendship with Veronica and the dissolution of her beauty, Alison has learned to embody empathy and humility.

As Mary Oliver (2004) writes in the poem, *Wild Geese*:

You do not have to be good.  
You do not have to walk on your knees  
for a hundred miles through the desert repenting.  
You only have to let the soft animal of your body  
love what it loves.

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