Testimony and Poesis:
Challenging the symbolic supports of a culture of violence against women

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Abstract

This thesis begins with an acknowledgement of the reality of wide-ranging, cross-cultural violence against women because they are women, in the world today. In a quest to locate a strategy for prevention of such abuse in cultural change, it initially details directions and difficulties of research in this field. Seeking deep-seated cultural change beyond that which existing legal, political and educational interventions offer, it engages with the power of poetics and literature to disrupt social imaginaries: the shared understandings that underpin practice within societies. It explores factors that inhibit or enable the emergence of witness to trauma in examples of post-Holocaust and incest survivor testimony. In engagement with the writing of Paul Celan, it asks how poetics might speak the unspeakable when such trauma narratives fail. It draws on the thinking of Julia Kristeva and Emmanuel Levinas on language, subject formation and ethics to examine the complexities of this issue. Having located this move within a current strand of feminist theory, it goes on to employ the fiction of J.M. Coetzee as an example of literature which by its form disrupts and subverts existing discourses, such as those that currently frame gender identity.

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Contents

Introduction

A church woman from the Democratic Republic of the Congo had carried them in her handbag to the General Assembly of the World Council of Churches held in Porto Alegre, Brazil in February 2006. At a women's pre-assembly meeting, this woman (I never knew her name), heard an address from the female Dean of a theological college in Kenya. She spoke of the fear of rape that existed in her country for every woman, of whatever age, in the home, in church, on the street, at work. The woman from the D.R.C., empowered by being in a situation where others had an understanding of the fear and pain that she knew, opened her bag to show others the photographs that she carried. They were of women and showed horrific injuries inflicted on them when they were raped in the ongoing armed conflict in their country. This woman was desperate that the world should know and see what was happening to these women. So that witness to this trauma could surface she needed the assurance of a sympathetic listening community and it seemed on this occasion that words were simply not enough to convey what she needed to say – hence the pictures. Her actions also took away words, even her sympathetic audience did not know what to say in response.

I have worked for a number of years on a project run by the World Council of Churches concerned with the churches response to the issue of violence against women. This incident is one of a number in which I have been witness to the struggle of women, victims and survivors from across the world, to give voice to their experiences. At that General Assembly there was a strong message from the women that I met, that the issue of violence of all kinds against women is still not fully acknowledged in society. In spite of recent progress in legal protection for women in some societies, there was still a strong sense that the nature and extent of the problem is not understood or dealt with effectively, particularly in church contexts.

Such pastoral, listening experiences have led directly to the writing of this thesis. They have alerted me to the difficulties inherent in witnessing to such trauma and they have also left me with a deep unease with regard to the effectiveness of current strategies to reduce or even prevent such gender-specific violence. In spite of inspiring work being done to repair damaged lives and raise consciousness and

understanding through research, many societies still seem to be built on the silent oppression, denigration and abuse of women, which comes to the fore particularly at times of stress and conflict. In the light of this my quest began for a way of disrupting the shared cultural understanding of gender that appears to underpin cultural practice, for a strategy to break open and destabilise such categories of identity. A pivotal point in this search was an encounter in the work of feminist theologian Rebecca Chopp with the contention that a 'poetics of testimony' might have the power to disrupt such shared cultural understandings. This set me on the path to explore how literature might function in this respect.

Chapter One of this quest maps out the difficulties involved in research on this subject and that surround the issue effectively making its way into public consciousness. In response to this I turn to the possibilities embodied in a 'poetics of testimony', and begin to explore how this might operate though the qualities of poetic language, for example in the workings of metaphor, as explored in the work of Paul Ricoeur.

In Chapter Two I review the difficulties inherent in the surfacing of witness to trauma from the perspective of survivors of the Holocaust and of incest survivors and conclude with an examination of the work and use of language of the poet Paul Celan.

I seek to understand in greater depth, in Chapter Three, how poetic language might function within culture and turn to the theories of Julia Kristeva in this regard. Since I see interpersonal violence as being between a Self and an Other, I also explore Kristeva's understanding of subject formation and her distinctive thinking on ethics.

In Chapter Four to I review the thinking of Emmanuel Levinas and his compelling understanding of the face-to-face ethical relationship. I am also drawn to his theorising of the nature of language and the resonances that his concepts of the Saying and the Said have with Kristeva's regarding the operation of the semiotic and symbolic. I conclude by investigating his initial theorising of the concept of 'the feminine' as embodying absolute alterity, and note feminist responses to his work.

Writing as one who would regard herself as a feminist, in Chapter Five I offer some justification from contemporary theory for turning to literature and using the literature written by a man as a case study.

This case study forms Chapter Six and Chapter Seven. Firstly, in Chapter Six, I write about the nature of Coetzee's writing and clarify why I think it is so appropriate for this thesis to use it as an exemplar. Finally in Chapter Seven I draw on five of his novels to give some sense of the reading experience that they embody and the effect they may have on a reader and reading community.

Although inspired by the work of feminist theologians, such as Rebecca Chopp and Sharon Welch, who emphasise the need for the churches to engage in emancipatory praxis (see Chopp, 1991) or affirm that the truth of every theological statement should be judged by the praxis that it enables for the future (see Welch 1985:25), this thesis does not itself frame an immediate 'theological' response to these experiences. I would contend however that it is a considered response to an acute practical theological issue and in the Conclusion I offer some further theological reflection on the trajectory that this thesis follows. Beyond this, I see it as having a place in the strong tradition of feminist theological engagement with literature. Heather Walton in her recent work has sought to encourage those so engaged, towards a venture into 'wild places' where literature 'refers beyond itself to all the symbolic order is unable to regulate and control' (Walton, 2007a:168) and embrace the 'potential that literary and artistic works do posses to affect political change and challenge our understanding of the sacred (Walton, 2007a:169). This thesis sets out to venture into such 'wild places'.

At this point it may be helpful to clarify the use I make of certain terms.

Violence against women.

When I write of violence against women, I use this phrase to encompass a whole range of oppression and abuse, physical, emotional sexual, economic and structural that impacts on women because they are women. I have resisted using the abbreviation VAW for this issue since that seems to set the description at one remove from real women. I also use the term gender-specific violence to cover the same broad

category of violence of all forms. At times I specify that I am writing about domestic violence which is violence at the hands of a husband or partner or former husband or partner and the literature sometimes refers to this as intimate-partner violence.

Feminism.

In this thesis I do not often draw a distinction between the several strands and manifestations of feminism that are part of the movement as a whole. I do distinguish, particularly in Chapter Five between what has become known as Anglo/American feminism and 'Continental' or 'French' feminism, with these designations indicating sometimes divergent directions of development in theory and practice between the two. I write in the light of an awareness of the contested nature of the terms feminism and feminist, and acknowledge that there are those who would deny the application of the term feminist to their own work and those who would deny it to the work of others.

Art/literature/poetry/poetics.

These are terms that it is not always easy or profitable to separate or closely define, and I do not attempt to rigorously define one over against the other in this work. I take my lead from Chopp in this respect. She speaks, as I later note, of the 'poetics of testimony' which she does not limit to poetry proper. She use the term 'for those discourses - poetry novels, theory, theology – that speak the unspeakable and tell of the suffering and hope of particular communities who have not been authorised to speak' (Chopp, 2001:61).

Chapter 1

The Power of 'Poesis'

poesis – meaning 'to make'

To make and make again where such unmaking reigns (Rich, 1978: 64).

Understanding violence against women

In their book *Understanding Violence Against Women,* Nancy Crowell and Ann Burgess state that 'a vital part of understanding a social problem and a precursor to preventing it is an understanding of what causes it' (Crowell and Burgess, 1996:49). They then go on to list possible theories of the cause or causes of violence against women that have been suggested in the last thirty or so years since this issue first became the object of scholarly attention and research (see Crowell and Burgess, 1996:49-50). This list covers: biological, e.g. androgenic hormonal influences, evolutionary theories, intra psychic explanations focused on mental disorder or personality traits and profiles, social learning models that highlight the socialization experiences that shape individual men to be violent. It also includes social information processing theory concerning the cognitive processes that offenders engage in before during and after violence, socio-cultural analyses aimed at understanding the structural features of society at the level of the dyad, family, peer group, school, religion, media and the state that encourage male violence and maintain women as a vulnerable class of potential victims, and feminist explanations stressing the gendered nature of violence against women and its roots in patriarchal social systems (see Crowell and Burgess, 1996:49-50).

This has now become a huge field for research, initially predominantly undertaken in the USA, but now including studies from a wide range of cultures.[1] It is apparent from the scale of this scholarly activity that the cause or causes of such violence have been sought across a wide range of discourses, in the disciplines of biology, genetics, sociology, psychology, social sciences, cultural studies, criminology and gender

[1]The database 'Violence and abuse Abstracts: Current literature in Interpersonal Violence' summarizes more than 1300 articles and chapters in professional literature each year. (see Löbmann et al, 2003:309).

studies.

Many writers and researchers into this issue acknowledge the difficulty in isolating a single cause of violence against women and suggest a number of interrelated causal factors. Timothy Gorringe, for example, states 'monocausal explanations are scarcely ever right' (Gorringe, 2005:24), and Felicity De Zulueta would concur that this is a multi-causal problem. She says, 'There is clearly a need to abandon a model of linear causation when attempting to understand the origins of violence ... a multidimensional approach is necessary that emphasizes the interplay between developing individuals (with their genetic heritage) and their environments'(De Zulueta, 1993:40). Other writers stress that societal attitudes that condone abuse, and violence, for example in child rearing, war, sport and entertainment open the way for violence against women (Löbmann et al, 2003:318).

In her article 'Intimate partner violence: causes and prevention', Rachel Jewkes also highlights the difficulty that has existed in isolating a cause or a number of causes of such violence. However while past research drawn principally from the USA has offered limited perspectives, she sees the expansion of the research base in this field over the past decade, to include well designed cross-sectional studies of violence against women from developing countries, as offering greater possibilities for identifying associations between possible causal factors (Jewkes, 2002:1423). Writing from the position of this being a health issue, she sees this expansion in research as clarifying the interventions needed for primary prevention.

Responding to this issue, in a 'scientific' or 'sociological' fashion, studies in these disciplines have attempted to address two contentious areas: defining the problem and establishing some verifiable measure of its prevalence.

Most studies begin by offering a definition of what they understand by 'violence against women'. This is not straightforward. Violence against women, as I have indicated, is complex both in cause and effect. It is a 'heterogeneous phenomenon encompassing diverse types of violence, victims and offenders' (Löbmann et al, 2003:311). Any adequate definition needs to address such questions as, what counts as violence against women? Is severity or frequency of abuse a defining factor? How

can psychological or emotional violence be gauged? Whose viewpoint, whose definition, carries more weight? Some cultures, for example do not criminalise rape within marriage, but a victim of such abuse may well define her experience as violent assault.

Addressing this last point, Jayne Mooney (2000) discusses the way in which 'radical feminists' have challenged conventional definitions of violence and legal categories. She says that when conventional definitions are employed women find that the experiences, which they regard as abusive, are differently defined under the dominant male discourse, which classifies such behaviour as normal or to be expected. She cites Kelly's argument that, 'It is in men's interest, as a class and as perpetrators of sexual violence, to ensure the definitions of sexual violence are as limited as possible. Language is a further means of controlling women' (Kelly, 1988a:130 in Mooney, 2000:92). She would claim that radical feminists would want to define such violence as *women* themselves would define it.

A further question in the search for an accurate definition is whether intentionality of the act of violence is important. In her book *The Will to Violence,* Susanne Kappeler cautions that we must take account of people's 'will to violence' and that we cannot simply explain violence by attention to 'circumstances' nor counter it by attempting to change those circumstances, without admitting that people also need to change (Kappeler, 1995:4). She claims that a politics aiming at a change in people's behaviour would require 'political work that is very much more cumbersome and very much less promising of success than is the use of state power and social control' (Kappeler, 1995:5). Such a change would require political consciousness-raising, and this cannot be imposed on others by force or by compulsory educational measures. It would require an understanding of people which takes seriously and reckons with their will, both their will to violence and their will to change (see Kappeler, 1995:5). She continues,

> A political analysis of violence needs to recognise this will, the personal decision in favour of violence ... For without this decision there will be no violent act, not even in circumstances which potentially permit it. It is the

> decision to violate, not just the act itself, which makes a person a perpetrator of violence (Kappeler, 1995:5).

The important question that Kappeler's analysis raises for this thesis is, what might influence such a decision and what is taken to be normative in this respect in a particular society.

Continuing then, to pursue a definition of violence against women, I turn to that of Löbmann and her co-researchers. They break down the definition into two parts, "violence" and "women". For them, '"violence" is understood as an incident in which an acting individual intentionally injures another individual' (Selg, Mees & Berg, 1988:17 in Löbmann et al, 2003:310). This violent action by a perpetrator can be physical or psychological in nature, or both (see Löbmann et al, 2003:310). They go on to say that although an uncontroversial, exhaustive and precise definition of violence is still hard to find, the object of investigation is quite clear. 'In almost every single case it is indisputable that a particular act is 'aggressive', 'violent' etc (for instance: slapping or beating)' (Löbmann et al, 2003:310).

Dealing with the second part of the definition, violence against "women", Löbmann et al. assert that violence may be directed against women because of their biological sex or their gender (their social role as a woman). They therefore sum up the concept of violence against women as 'the intentional, physical and/or psychological abuse of women due to their biological sex and/or their social role'(Löbmann et al, 2003:311).The use of 'intentional' in such a definition may of course be contested by those who see the perpetrators of such violence as mentally ill.

Löbmann deals with European studies. The most common distinction in this research (and in studies of violence against women generally) is made between psychological, physical and sexual violence, this categorisation relating to the actions of the perpetrator. In many cases data is obtained from crime studies but different studies cover different things, and there are marked methodological differences between studies. The only way to get an overview is to bring together different studies with different methodologies. The data then can only be viewed as 'a rough indication of the magnitude of the phenomena' (Löbmann et al, 2003:316).

My own understanding is that the object of investigation may be less clear with respect to psychological, emotional violence which is clearly harder to delineate, for researchers, victims and perpetrators alike.

In her overview of the subject, Jewkes includes within her definition of intimate partner violence, 'physical violence directed against a woman by a current or ex husband or boyfriend' and comments 'The term 'intimate partner violence' often includes sexual violence and can also include psychological abuse: both these forms of abuse often, but not always, accompany physical violence'(Jewkes, 2002:1423). She also notes, however, that inconsistencies in the definitions used in research, especially with respect to the inclusion or exclusion of these later categories of sexual and psychological abuse by male intimate partners, has resulted in 'most global quantitative studies on the causes of intimate partner violence focusing solely on physical violence' (Jewkes, 2002:1423).

As with finding a workable definition, so establishing the *prevalence* of violence against women in any given society is also fraught with pitfalls, one of which is related to the structure of research projects. R. Emerson Dobash and Russell P. Dobash in their book *Women, Violence and Social Change*, have highlighted the way in which the structure of research frames results in certain ways and they call attention to the fact that no research is value free (see Dobash and Dobash, 1992:251). They point out that the methods used to gather data can be affected by the definition of the issue under research, in that this can lead to the inclusion of certain categories of explanation and the exclusion of others. They note that, 'Once an issue has been defined in a specific way, the method of that investigation and possible solutions are encapsulated within that original definition' (Dobash and Dobash, 1992:253). A research focus on individuals and their characteristics leads to research questions focusing on individual traits rather than on social and economic factors and to questions framed in terms of the characteristics of women who stay with violent men. This kind of research can lead to problems being located in women victims/survivors with a change in *their* behaviour being suggested as a solution to the problem of male violence. In research in the USA, such an emphasis on individual characteristics and social survey have dominated, and the main thrust has been to correlate background

characteristics of individuals (i.e. age, education, race, social class and occupation) with the incidence of violence (see Dobash and Dobash, 1992:253-254).

In Britain the focus of research has been much more on the dynamic processes associated with violence against women as well as responses to it. As Dobash and Dobash have reported,

> Major government funded research projects have focused on living and working in refuges; detailed accounts of violent events and a violent relationship: the beliefs and reactions of professionals working within social institutions including housing, the justice system and social and medical services (Dobash and Dobash, 1992:254).

In Britain a variety of data collection methods have been employed with less reliance on large scale social surveys (see Dobash and Dobash, 1992:254).

Importantly, these researchers also note in this context that state funding often determines the direction of research towards particular aspects of the problem to be studied and sometimes even the research method, and this in turn can impact on the findings (see Dobash and Dobash, 1992:255).

An example of this from the USA is the surfacing of the phenomenon of 'battered husbands'. In the USA this notion has been defined by some researchers as a problem of equal or even greater frequency and severity to that of violence against women. Thus there has developed a debate in the USA regarding research that shows the supposed symmetrical nature of violence in the home – with women being seen to be as violent as men – which has been set over against evidence and research demonstrating the asymmetrical nature of violence in the home, with men as the main perpetrators (see Dobash and Dobash, 1992:258). Dobash and Dobash label these conflicting research approaches as the family violence approach (FV) and the violence against women approach (VAW). They go on to demonstrate that in their view the claims of equivalence in violence and its impact are false and that these claims have evolved because of a restricted and ultimately flawed approach to such research (Dobash and Dobash, 1992:258).

These researchers have an obvious sympathy towards the body of research in this area which they refer to as Violence Against Women (VAW). They say that,

> In contrast to FV researchers' primary reliance on two surveys, these [VAW] researchers use a variety of methods to gather evidence, including: historical, documentary, ethnographic, case history, intensive interview and the survey. In addition, VAW researchers have gone beyond the narrow questions and restricted methods of the FV traditions to consider the dynamic nature of violence between men and women and to analyse the wider cultural and institutional contexts within which the problem emerged and continues (Dobash and Dobash, 1992:264).

Contributing to this debate, Pamela Cooper-White comments on the most comprehensive survey of the prevalence of intimate partner violence in the US (at the time of her writing), published in 2000 by the National Institute of Justice and the Centres for Disease Control and Prevention. She notes that this NIJ/CDC survey was the first to address the full extent of intimate partner violence against *both* male and female victims. In doing so however, the report refuted the findings of the previous National Family Violence Survey which suggested that women were roughly equal, or 'mutual' with men as perpetrators of intimate violence in US society. The authors of the NIJ/CDC survey state quite clearly:

> Women experience more intimate partner violence than do men. ... These findings support data from the Bureau of Justice Statistics' National Crime Victimization Survey, which consistently show women are at significantly greater risk of intimate partner violence than are men (Tjaden and Thoennes, 2000 in Cooper-White, 2005:2).

Another issue that Cooper-White notes from this report is that the researchers emphasized that not only the quantity of assaults, but also the repeated nature and seriousness of injury inflicted during those assaults, were unequal between women and men. They wrote:

> Women experience more chronic and injurious physical assaults at the hands

> of intimate partners than do men. The survey found that women who were physically assaulted by an intimate partner averaged 6.9 physical assaults by the same partner, but men averaged 4.4 assaults. The survey also found that 41.5 percent of the women who were physically assaulted by an intimate partner were injured during their most recent assault, compared with 19.9 percent of the men. These findings suggest that research aimed at understanding and preventing intimate partner violence against women should be stressed (Tjaden and Thoennes, 2000 in Cooper-White, 2005:2-3).

Cooper-White highlights another significant finding from this study which reinforces the significance of gender to the extent of violence perpetrated. She notes that 'women living with women experience less intimate partner violence (11%) than women living with men (21.7%), and men living with men experience considerably more such violence (23%) than men living with women (7%). The authors thereby conclude that, "strategies for preventing intimate partner violence should focus on risks posed by men"' (Cooper-White, 2005:3).

She goes on to say that 'under-reporting of intimate partner violence continues to be a problem, in spite of now three decades of increasingly public awareness and improved police and judicial training' (Cooper-White, 2005:3). She cites the authors of the NIJ/CDC report:

> Most intimate partner victimizations are not reported to the police. Only approximately one-fifth of all rapes, one-quarter of all physical assaults, and one-half of all stalkings perpetrated against female respondents by intimates were reported to the police. Even fewer rapes, physical assaults, and stalkings perpetrated against male respondents by intimates were reported. The majority of victims who did not report their victimization to the police thought the police would not or could not do anything on their behalf. These findings suggest that most victims of intimate partner violence do not consider the justice system an appropriate vehicle for resolving conflicts with intimates (Tjaden and Thoennes, 2000 in Cooper-White, 2005:3).

Here Cooper-White highlights the problem of under-reporting which she attributes to

a lack of faith in the judicial system. There are other reasons for under-reporting of male violence towards women to the authorities, or distortions in data collected by researchers. A woman may fear that she is putting herself in danger of further abuse if she tells anyone what is really happening. There may be cultural and/or religious prohibitions on speaking about what is happening.[2] There can be a strong element of shame felt by the victim.[3] She may have been conditioned into thinking that what has happened is her fault (see Orr, 2000).

Jewkes also raises the difficulty of conducting research on such sensitive topics as intimate partner violence. If research is carried out through interview then results can be highly dependent on the context of the interview and good interviewer training, and interviewer effects can be substantial (see Jewkes, 2002:1423). She points out that researchers have only recently begun to use a multilevel approach in analyses to allow for interviewer effects (Jewkes, 2002:1423).

Taking into account then, the possibility of substantial under-reporting, these studies confirm the understanding that I hold, partly as a result of reading accounts of gender-based violence from varied cultural contexts, that women are disproportionately more likely to be victims of intimate partner violence than men. However, even with so much ongoing research, under-reporting makes it difficult, to get a clear picture of the scope of the problem, and the number of women and men victim/survivors who are affected.

That there is not a generally held clear picture of the extent and seriousness of such intimate partner abuse, is reinforced by an observational population survey in one

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[2] An illustration of this is found in an article in the *New Internationalist* 401 June 2007 concerning the situation in Dafur. In 'War Against Women', Femke van Zeijl recounts the experience of a brother and sister at the hands of the *Janjaweed,* the Arab militia .When talking about the incident; their father 'is especially keen that the correct amount of money that was stolen from him gets put down on paper. He painstakingly dictates the exact number of Sudanese dinars and adds that he was also robbed of a strong mule. He didn't say a single word about the fact his 15 year old daughter was raped by four men' (van Zeijl, 2007:10).

[3] Testimony to this can be found in the words of women who have suffered domestic abuse:
'I don't know how to get away from this deep, deep sense of shame...He was never held to account for his behaviour, but I'm the one who is made to feel so bad...'. 'There was an enduring sense of responsibility and guilt because somehow I failed to conform to the image of 'happy ever after' Christian wife and mother – and you know we heard homilies about that so often. I was shamed into silence'. 'I was so shocked and humiliated, and just felt so shamed by what was happening – that was part of the shameful behaviour; that I became blameworthy for having the abuse visited upon me' (Orr, 2000: 16).

British city to assess awareness of domestic violence, conducted by Paula Nicholson and Richard Wilson.

They state that, 'While there appears to be a broadly held and well informed definition[4] of what actions constitute domestic violence and why it occurs, there are striking differences in perspective concerning public awareness of the frequency of domestic violence and knowledge of its importance as a safety issue indicating that it is still not seen as a serious social problem' (Nicholson and Wilson, 2004:266).

Nicholson and Wilson's description of violence against women and specifically domestic violence as a 'serious social problem' echoes that at the beginning of this chapter. For something to be a social problem, it must be owned as such and understood as such by the society in which it exists. Undoubtedly in many cultures knowledge of this form of violence is more in the public domain than it was fifty years ago, and there are more resources dedicated to mitigating the consequences of such abuse, and educational projects to influence future generations. However it is apparent that such initiatives cannot always counter deeply embedded cultural mores which to a degree allow and legitimate such violence (See, for example, Amenga-Etego, 2006: 23-46).

Still hidden after all this time (and research)

To support the contention that this issue is still in many ways not engaged with as 'a serious social problem' I offer one example from my own experience and another

[4] The abstract for Nicholson and Wilson's article contains this definition of domestic violence: 'Domestic violence involves the abuse, whether emotional, physical, sexual and /or economic, of one or more family (or ex-family) members by another family member within the home or wider domestic context. It is typically associated with increasing entrapment, injury, medical complaints, psycho-social problems and (sometimes) unsuccessful help-seeking. Research evidence demonstrates that domestic abuse is prolific, prolonged, impacts physically, emotionally and economically upon women and children in particular over the long term including well after they are 'safe' from the perpetrator. Furthermore, such abuse is widespread and happens all over the world' (Nicholson and Wilson, 2004:266).
They also claim that: 'Most domestic violence is perpetrated by men towards women (Grace, 1995; Hague & Malos, 1993; HASC,1993; Mayhew, Aye Maung & Mirrlees–Black, 1993); occurs across the social spectrum (American Psychological Association, 1998; Home Office, 2003), and involves a number of forms of violence including physical assault, sexual abuse and rape, threats and intimidation' (Nicholson and Wilson, 2004:267).

from a broad study by an international agency.

Attending the World Council of Churches Assembly in Brazil in February 2006 in my role as part-time consultant for the WCC on their project concerned with overcoming violence against women, it was made clear to me in many conversations that women, in the churches the world over, suffer violence and fear violence being done to them, specifically because they are women. Although women and men are working together to raise awareness of this issue, to support one another, to create projects to help victim/survivors, I was told by women from a range of different contexts that one of the problems with addressing the issue is that it is still largely silenced, veiled, covered, concealed, both in church communities and in society as a whole.

Supporting this conclusion with regard to the hidden nature of much violence against women, a recent study by the World Health Organisation, based on evidence collected from 24,000 women and presenting findings from 15 sites in 10 countries on physical violence against women by intimate partners says, 'In all countries the interviewer was frequently the first person that the abused women had ever talked to about their partners' physical violence' (WHO, 2005:18).

The recommendations of the study claim that it clearly demonstrates that violence against women is widespread and deeply ingrained, and has serious impacts on women's' health and wellbeing. 'Its continued existence is morally indefensible; its cost to individuals, to health systems and to society in general is enormous. *Yet no other major problem of public health has ... been so widely ignored and so little understood'* (WHO, 2005:22 emphasis added).

The question these examples foreground is why practices and behaviours that affect the lives of so many women and men and children world wide, and have done so throughout recorded history, are still comparatively so widely ignored and so little understood. There appears to be a discrepancy here between the extent and range of research into this issue and its 'real' presence in public consciousness.

Some cultures are characterised by their machismo nature and obvious gender inequalities but even those that appear to promote gender equality, where laws are

enacted for the protection of women, still have high rates of violence against women. The question this situation raises for me is whether there is an *unacknowledged* acceptance of such violence within what has been called the 'social imaginary'[5] of most societies and whether this in some way legitimates and sustains practices that are damaging to women, almost at a level of what might be called a 'social unconscious'. If this is the case, is it because 'woman' has no presence, is an absence in culture, as has been theorised by some, notably Continental, feminist writers? In a search for a preventative strategy that might impact on the current situation, and where explanations offered from a range of different discourses still do not seem to lead to profound change, I am led to ask if it is possible to disrupt current social imaginaries which must at some level legitimate the ubiquitous practices of abuse and violence against women, and what might effect such disruption.

Poetics of testimony

My thinking in this respect has been stimulated by the work of feminist theologian Rebecca Chopp and in particular by her paper entitled 'Theology and the Poetics of Testimony' (Chopp, 2001) In this she explores the significance for the relationship of theology to theory, of 'the discursive practices and various voices that seek to describe or name that which rational discourse will not or cannot reveal' (Chopp, 2001:56).[6] She attributes these voices to those variously victimised and marginalised in contemporary society and her analysis can well be applied to women who are victims and survivors of male violence.

Chopp advocates giving attention to what she terms 'poetics of testimony'. She says

> This genre [poetics of testimony] that I am naming provides a strong critique of dominant cultural practices and provokes *refigurations of the social imaginary*, that is the basic presuppositions, metaphors and rules that frame cultural operations. The poetics of testimony challenges how the real is both

[5] I clarify the use of this term later in this chapter. Chopp uses it to refer to 'the basic presuppositions, metaphors and rules that frame cultural operations' (Chopp, 2001:57).
[6] In following chapters I will seek to demonstrate that both the work of the poet Paul Celan and the writer and critic J.M.Coetzee offer examples of such voices.

> represented and created in culture by summoning us to question the role of modern theory as the court of the real (Chopp, 2001:57, emphasis added).

Employing the words of Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub from their book *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, in Psychoanalysis and History*, [7] she claims that such witness becomes,

> conceptual prisms through which we attempt to apprehend – and to make tangible to our imagination – the ways in which our cultural frames of reference and our pre-existing categories which delimit and determine our perception of reality have failed, essentially, both to contain, and to account for, the scale of what has happened in contemporary history (Felman and Laub, 1992: xv in Chopp, 2001:64).

These words were written in respect of testimony to the Holocaust, but they are, as I intend to demonstrate, just as pertinently applied to the suffering undergone by women at the hands of men, not just in contemporary history but throughout time.

The main thrust of Chopp's paper is to explore the relationship between what is revealed in testimony of the excluded and marginalized and what she terms the 'court of reason'. She delineates what she sees as two well developed assumptions in modern thought. Firstly 'Human reason is the chief arbitrator of reality', and secondly, 'revelation does not yield empirical truth as judged by reason' (Chopp, 2001:58-59). She finds these lead to a third law of modern rational reality that 'Reason will judge and order even history itself' (Chopp, 2001:59) and the ultimate outcome of this position is that 'The theorist -- historian, philosopher, sociologist, theologian – is to judge the evidence and thus to give order to history by forming a coherent narrative' (Chopp, 2001:60). Chopp goes on to argue that instead of being put on trial by theory, (be it theological, philosophical, etc) testimony of this contemporary era, for example that of Holocaust survivors, puts the court of theory on trial as to discovering the truth. 'The judge, so to speak, is on trial, or perhaps the whole courtroom itself, its procedures and powers and its own ability to speak

[7] I engage in depth with the work of Felman and Laub in *Testimony* in the next chapter.

credibly are on trial'(Chopp, 2001:61).

Chopp wishes to speak of 'the real that is ruled out of court, the real of which language ordinarily does not even know how to speak'(Chopp, 2001:61). She goes on to expand upon what she means by such a 'poetics of testimony'.

> Though I introduce this trope as the "poetics" of testimony, I do not limit it to poetry proper. I prefer to speak of the poetics of testimony for those discourses - poetry, novels, theory, theology - that speak the unspeakable and tell of the suffering and hope of particular communities who have not been authorized to speak. My use of "poetics" points toward a kind of writing that exists outside much of modern theory. Such discourse is an intervention, for it must create language, forms, images to speak of what, in some way, has been ruled unspeakable or at least not valid or credible to modern reason. Compared to rhetoric, poetics seeks not so much to argue as to refigure, to reimagine and refashion the world (Chopp, 2001:61).

Concerning the moral imperative enacted by such poetics of testimony, in language that conjures up Levinas's thinking on our obligation to the 'other'[8], Chopp says ' The language of testimonies asks us to hear this other as the first and most indisputable claim of existence. ... Testimonies enact a moral consciousness and communal, even at times global, responsibility' (Chopp, 2001:62).

Taking my cue from Chopp's thinking, my concern, initially, is to explore what might be understood by 'poetics' and by 'social imaginary' and to investigate what role 'poetics' might indeed play in critiquing dominant cultural practices and provoking refigurations of such social imaginaries as might currently legitimate the degree of violence against women that is present but often concealed within many societies.

The nature of poetics

In the search for the truth and the uncovering of the 'real', poetics has not always had

[8] I will enlarge on Levinas's concept of ethical obligation in Chapter 4

a good reputation.

Poetics or 'poesis' (meaning 'making'), can refer to all forms of artistic creativity in the plastic and visual arts, drama, music, poetry and prose as fiction. In Book X of Plato's *Republic,* the text speaks of the ancient war between poetry and philosophy. This dichotomy puts into play the notion that the way of philosophy (or what was understood as philosophy in the *Republic*) is the appropriate way to explore routes to the truth, whereas poetry by contrast offers a false direction.

Plato in his *Republic* strongly advocates employing caution with regards to poesis and having a full awareness of the dangers of its powers (see Johnston, 1997:1). However it could be said that Plato himself reverts to poesis in constructing his fictional dialogues, and particularly in the imaginative parts of his work such as the Ring of Gyres, the Allegory of the Cave and the Myth of Er, for example. In the *Symposium* (205b) Plato also speaks of all art as being poetry and all poetry being creation or 'the passing of something from nothing into being' (Plato, Symposium 205b).

Despite such seemingly unresolved contradictions with regard to poetry in Plato's work, the concept of mimesis which prevails in the *Republic* and elsewhere logically leads to the condemnation of poetry and art in general as the copy of a copy. This is because, according to Socrates in this dialogue, there is, beyond our sense perceptions, a higher truth that we cannot grasp, and poesis, being in turn 'an imitation of the world around us – of the people, objects, places and sounds in the world' that we appreciate through our senses, must be 'an imitation of an imitation, a third remove from the truth' (Johnston,1997:3). Hence, if we accept this understanding, poesis is highly unreliable and though attractive to us, it is dangerously seductive. Philosophy, not poesis, is the path to the truth.

Ian Johnston in his consideration of poesis in Plato's *Republic* suggests that a further objection to poesis was raised by Plato, namely that

> *Poesis,* by its very nature, must appeal to and arouse the most dangerous part of the human personality, the sensual part. Since, at the very best of times, the human psyche is in a state of tension, any incitement to the lowest part of it

> (the emotions) threatens psychological harmony and thus the balance necessary to virtue and happiness. Hence poetry not only corrupts the understanding by misrepresenting the truth of things; it also destabilizes the individual human psyche, encouraging various kinds of unwelcome destructive and self-destructive feelings and actions (Johnston, 1997:5-6).[9]

Throughout this thesis these questions raised by Plato with regard to whether or not poesis can represent truth, will continue to surface. My interest lies not so much in what it represents but rather its destabilizing effects not just on the individual human psyche but also with a society's social imaginary. With Chopp, I am suggesting that poetics or poesis in the form of poetry or other forms of literature might have this disruptive effect on the social imaginary of a given society, such as to throw into question the traditional discourses that underpin that society and its constructions of history and gender. I will now explore how poetics might operate in this respect.

Ricoeur and the operation of metaphor

Plato's criticism of the poets and their inflammatory figurative language forms a background for Aristotle's understanding of metaphors as substitutions for literal terms. He approached metaphor in terms of individual words and in terms of reduction to literal language. Dan Stiver, in his book *Theology After Ricoeur*, traces the history of understandings of metaphor as they developed from Plato and Aristotle to the work of Paul Ricoeur. He claims that 'Plato's and Aristotle's influence led to denigration of metaphor in favour of prose for the sake of expressing truth', and goes on to say that to a large extent, 'in the modern period, with its quest for clarity and exactness, metaphor has been relegated to the ornamental and incidental' (Stiver, 2001:105).

It may be surprising then that in his key work on metaphor, *The Rule of Metaphor* (1978), Ricoeur begins with Aristotle, and according to Stiver he quotes approvingly Aristotle's observation in the *Poetics* that 'the greatest thing by far is to be a master of

[9] This has echoes of the operation of the semiotic in the work of Kristeva and its relation to psychosis, which I note in Chapter 3.

metaphor' (Stiver, 2001:105).

Challenging what had become the traditional understanding of metaphor, Ricoeur and others developed a *tension* or *interaction* theory of metaphor over against the traditional *substitution* theory (Ricoeur, 1976:52 in Stiver, 2001:106). As Stiver explains, Ricoeur emphasizes the point that metaphors involve anything between a sentence and an entire work, and they cannot thus be understood in terms of substitution of individual single words or phrases. Stiver explains Ricoeur's understanding of the operation of metaphor thus: 'out of the interaction between the clash of literal meanings, a "semantic impertinence" ensues that gives rise to new meaning. Ricoeur calls this dynamic a "split reference" in which literal meaning is denied in order to construct an imaginative new meaning. The result is a dynamic and elusive *is/is not*' (Stiver, 2001:106).

As Ricoeur himself says in his *Interpretation Theory* 'My contention is that discourse cannot fail to be about something...In one manner or another, poetic texts speak about the world. But not in a descriptive way...the reference here is not abolished but divided or split' (Ricoeur, 1976:36-37 in Valdés, 1991:8). Describing this operation further he says,

> This redescription is guided by the interplay between differences and resemblances that give rise to the tension at the level of the utterance. It is precisely from this tensive apprehension that a new vision of reality springs forth which ordinary vision resists because it is attached to the ordinary use of words. The eclipse of the objective, manipulable world thus makes way for the revelation of a new dimension of reality and truth (Ricoeur, 1976:68 in Valdés, 1991:10).

Thus, as John Wall has noted, metaphors for Ricoeur are 'the most brilliant illustration of the power of language to create meaning by the means of unexpected comparisons'(Ricoeur, 1983/1984:27 in Wall, 2003:331). Although in Wall's understanding, metaphors differ from symbols in comparing two or more terms with one another, they retain the analogous poetic function of symbols by, as Ricoeur puts it 'introducing the spark of imagination into a 'thinking more' at the conceptual level'

(Ricoeur, 1975/1977:303 in Wall, 2003:331-332). Metaphors then can be seen not simply as alternative ways to represent concepts, but dialectical means by which completely new meaning is formed (see Wall, 2003:331-332). As Ricoeur says, 'Imagination comes into play in that moment when a new meaning emerges from out of the ruins of the literal interpretation' (Ricoeur, 1986:213-19 in Kearney, 2004: 40).

Thus for Ricoeur, as Valdés notes, the task of interpretation demands an understanding of poetic meaning which is still grounded in the eclipsed literal meaning. He goes on to sum up Ricoeur's argument thus; 'the referential power of poetic discourse is linked to the eclipse of ordinary meaning, to the creation of a heuristic fiction and finally to the redescribed reality brought to the reader' (Valdés, 1991:14).

In Ricoeur's understanding this redescribed reality is accessible particularly through literature 'Literature is ... the corpus of texts that have the capacity to promote the redescription of the world to their readers' (Valdés, 1991:12). Valdés also notes that Ricoeur concludes *Interpretation Theory* by saying

> Interpretation is the process by which disclosure of new modes of being, or if you prefer Wittgenstein to Heidegger, of new forms of life - gives to the subject a new capacity for knowing himself (sic). If the reference of the text is the project of a world, then it is not the reader who primarily projects himself. The reader is rather enlarged in his capacity of self projection by receiving a new mode of being from the text itself (Ricoeur, 1976: 94 in Valdés, 1991: 12).

What arises from Ricoeur's understanding of the operation of metaphor in texts that is significant for this thesis is the fact that he emphasises that poetic texts and indeed literature in general speak about the world and open the way for fresh understandings. 'The poetic imagination liberates the reader into a free space of possibility, suspending the reference to the immediate world of perception (both the author's and the reader's) and thereby disclosing new ways of being in the world' (Kearney, 2004:41). My contention is that there is an urgent need to discover new ways of being with regard to the way men and women interact in all cultures.

Ricoeur's concern, and mine, is not just to open up new possibilities through the interpretation of texts, to have a vision of fresh possibilities, of new worlds, but also that such visions might lead to action that might indeed bring them to reality. Speaking of the imagination he says that it has 'a projective function which pertains to the very dynamism of action' (Ricoeur, 1986 in Kearney, 2004:41-42). As Kearney understands Ricoeur's thinking on this, it is that,

> The metaphors, symbols or narratives produced by imagination all provide us with 'imaginative variations' of the world, thereby offering us the freedom to conceive of the world in other ways and to undertake forms of action which might lead to its transformation (Kearney, 2004:42).

Social Imaginary and Ricoeur

In his early writing Ricoeur was concerned with the workings of 'narrative' in the literary tradition. He presents a process of 'enplotment' as the manner in which human beings 'provide "shape" to what remains chaotic, obscure and mute' (Ricoeur,1991:115). The operation of plotting synthesises the heterogeneous elements of existence' and 'Narration organises them into an intelligible whole' (Ricoeur, 1991:426).

As Kearney has identified, plots are also found at the level of what Ricoeur calls the *social imaginary*, 'that body of collective stories, histories and ideologies which informs our modes of socio-political action' (Kearney, 2004:7). The central function of hermeneutics for Ricoeur as identified by Kearney is the critical interrogation of the socio-political *imaginaire* which governs any society and motivates its citizens (see Kearney, 2004:7).

Ricoeur analyses social imagination, which he sees as constitutive of our lived reality, under two headings, ideology and utopia. He claims that ideology promotes collective images which integrate a community around a shared identity.

> Ideology expresses a social group's need for a communal set of images whereby it can represent itself to itself and to others. It is an essential aspect of the social imaginary, which enables any particular society to identify itself. Each society, explains Ricoeur, invokes a tradition of mythic idealizations through which it may be aligned with a stable predictable and repeatable order of meanings (Kearney, 2004:78).

Under the concept of utopia, images work in the opposite direction, that of novelty, rupture and discontinuity. Kearney claims that for Ricoeur 'The social imagination serves *both* an ideological role of identification *and* a utopian role of disruption' (Kearney, 2004:7). Ricoeur promotes a dialectical balance between the belonging conjured by ideology and the distance effected by the imaging of utopia and in this way ideology and utopia are complementary.

> Cut off from one another, they run the risk of pathological extremes: ideology imprisoning us in reactionary conservatism, utopia sacrificing us to a schizophrenic image of an abstract future without the conditions for its realization. The danger is severing our utopian horizon of expectation from the ideological horizon of past and present (Kearney, 2004:7).

Kearney understands Ricoeur as insisting that one of the most urgent hermeneutic tasks we are presented with today is to find a way of reconciling the dual tasks of the social imaginary: the reanimating of tradition and the realizing of utopia (see Kearney, 2004:7).

New Social Imaginaries

Interested, as I am, in Chopp's assertion that exposure to poetics of testimony can provoke a refiguration of the social imaginary, I am concerned to understand more fully what the term 'social imaginary' might encompass and imply with regard to the way cultural change happens. Having already encountered the term in the work of Ricoeur, I want also to draw on a body of work detailing what have been termed "new" or "modern" social imaginaries. A recent issue of the journal *Public Culture* (14 (1) 2002) brought into conversation the work of a number of prominent thinkers

working in this area of theory. In an introductory paper in this journal, 'Toward New Imaginaries: An Introduction', Dilip Parameshwar Gaonkar offers this as a partial definition:

> ... social imaginaries are ways of understanding the social, that become social entities themselves, mediating collective life. Often social scientists and historians have tried to understand these entities in terms of ideas, theories, philosophies – what might be called "third person" or "objective" points of view. But some crucial self-understandings are not formulated in explicit or theoretical moulds. They are first-person subjectivities that build upon implicit understandings that underlie and make possible common practices. They are embedded in the habitus of a population or are carried in *modes of address, stories, symbols, and the like*. They are imaginary in a double sense: they exist by virtue of representation or implicit understandings, even when they acquire immense institutional force; and they are the means by which individuals understand their identities and their place in the world (Gaonkar, 2002:4, emphasis added).

Gaonkar sets his discussion of new social imaginaries over against the work of Cornelius Castoriadis who he recognised as a pioneer in the field, and who gives one of the fullest contemporary expressions of the idea of a social imaginary as 'an enabling but not fully explicable symbolic matrix within which a people imagine and act as world-making collective agents' (Gaonkar, 2002:1), in his book *The Imaginary Institution of Society* (1987). Disillusioned with the determinism of Marxism, Castoriadis attempted to delineate the creative force that operates in formation of socio-historical worlds. As Gaonkar interprets him, he views society as a self-creating, self-instituting enterprise which can develop separately from its past. For him,

> a social-historical world is created ex nihilo in a burst of imaginative praxis carried out not by conscious individuals or groups but by anonymous masses who constitute themselves as a people in that very act of founding. This world forming and meaning-bestowing creative force is the social imaginary of the instituting society (Gaonkar, 2002:6).

Again as Gaonkar sees it, Castoriadis

> ... treats as paradigmatic those moments when something absolutely new comes into being, when the instituting society supplants the instituted society, to illuminate the ceaseless creativity of the imaginary dimension that informs and motivates everything that transpires in a social domain (Gaonkar, 2002:6).

For Castoriadis the imaginary is 'the constitutive magma of meaning, the structuring matrix without which chaos would reign (Gaonkar, 2002:7).

Castoriadis affirms that language is the medium par excellence in which these social imaginary significations become manifest and do their constitutive work, and it is, as has been noted, 'by representing itself through symbols, myths legends and other collectively shared significations that each society derives its unity and identity' (Gaonkar, 2002:7). This again highlights the importance of the role of arts and literature in this process. Gaonkar notes that Castoriadis's views on social creativity in language are similar to Ricoeur's and in language close to that of Ricoeur on metaphor, speaks of his understanding that

> creation of new meaning in language, for example through metaphorization, can serve as a heuristic model for understanding how social imaginary significations arise and rupture the existing social code to disclose a new horizon of meaning, a new order of things, a new world (Gaonkar, 2002:8).

Gaonkar critiques Castoriadis's approach principally in that, in spite of offering this inspiring perspective on the human condition, he rarely engages with the question of *how* change and difference are produced in specific societies, through the workings of the social imaginary's significations at particular local social-historical junctures (Gaonkar, 2002:9). It is how change might come about in shared understandings and cultural practice that is for me a key question.

In the same journal issue, Charles Taylor, concerned to account for differences among Western 'modernities', develops Castoriadis's notion of the social imaginary as a

generative matrix, while emphasizing its role in the hermeneutics of everyday life, and again stresses that it is carried in images, stories and legends. As Taylor spells out

> What I am trying to get at with this term [social imaginary] is something much broader and deeper than the intellectual schemes people may entertain when they think about social reality in a disengaged mode. I am thinking rather of the ways in which people imagine their social existence, how they fit together with others, how things go on between them and their fellows, the expectations that are normally met, and the deeper normative notions and images that underlie these expectations (Taylor, 2002:106).

He continues by identifying three of the many differences he sees between social theory and the social imaginary. Firstly he says 'I speak of *imaginary* because I'm talking about the way ordinary people "imagine" their social surroundings, and this is often not expressed in theoretical terms; it is carried in images, stories and legends'(Taylor, 2002:106). He also points out that theory is usually the possession of a small minority within any given society, whereas the social imaginary is, by its very definition, shared by large sections and possibly the whole society. Finally he claims that 'the social imaginary is that common understanding that makes possible common practices and a widely shared sense of legitimacy' (Taylor, 2002:106).

As well as being concerned for the role art and literature may play in the processes of cultural change, my interest also lies in this final point made by Taylor. Does it imply that where there are common practices within society, such as practices of violence towards women (as well as to others who are viewed as in some way marginalised) that these are legitimised, if not overtly by the rules and laws and public pronouncements of a society, then by some shared common understanding of what it really means to be men and women in that society?

Taylor shares with Castoriadis an understanding that the 'idiom' of the social imaginary is distinct. 'It is expressed and carried in images, stories, legends and modes of address that constitute a symbolic matrix that cannot be reduced to theoretical terms' (Gaonkar, 2002:10) and this is what distinguishes it from *habitus*

(as in Pierre Bourdieu's understanding) for Taylor. Taylor claims that 'While nourished in embodied habitus, social imaginary is given expression on the symbolic level and it therefore occupies a fluid middle ground between embodied practices and explicit doctrines' (Taylor, 2001:189 in Gaonkar, 2002:11). In other words, a social imaginary carries within it an image of moral order, which gives meaning to and legitimacy to current embodied practices and cultural forms. That image of moral order might have, itself, originated in an explicit doctrine or theory, but it penetrates and takes hold of a social imaginary through slow and complex procedures (see Gaonkar, 2002:11).

Interestingly, for research such as this that is seeking to understand and promote cultural change to help to prevent gender related violence, Taylor also addresses how the slow and complex process of change might happen. He claims that what start off as theories (of moral order) held by a few people may come to infiltrate the social imaginary.

> In this process, what is originally just an idealization grows into a complex imaginary through being taken up and associated with social practices, in part traditional ones, which are often transformed by the contact. This is crucial to what I called... the extension of the understanding of moral order. It couldn't have become the dominant view in our culture without this penetration and transformation of our imaginary (Taylor, 2002:110).

He asks what exactly happens when a theory 'penetrates' and brings about change to a social imaginary in this way. He says

> For the most part, people take up, improvise, or are inducted into new practices. These practices are made sense of by the new outlook, the one first articulated in the theory; this outlook is the one that gives sense to the practices. And hence the new understanding becomes accessible to the participants in a way it wasn't before. It begins to define the contours of their world and may eventually become the taken-for-granted shape of things, too obvious to mention.

> But this process isn't just one-sided, a theory making over a social imaginary. In making sense of the action the theory is "glossed"... given a particular shape in the context of these practices. ... The new practice, with the implicit understanding it generates, can be the basis for modifications of theory, which in turn can inflect practice and so on (Taylor, 2002:111).

The work of Taylor, and others in this field, indicates that in their understanding of the term, social imaginaries are not static. There can be changes over time in shared understandings of what is morally acceptable within a particular society. Such understandings affect practices that in turn shape future understandings. Since my concern with regard to the current level of violence against women world-wide, is to explore how a significant cultural change might come about that might lead to less violence of this sort, I am seeking to discover how this might happen. I am also concerned to discover, following the lead of thinkers such as Chopp, Kristeva, and Levinas, what part literature and poetics might play in such a process.

In his discussion of Taylor's theories, Gaonkar highlights Taylor's understanding of what he sees as progress in moral life towards mutual benefit within societies. He claims that, whereas pre-modern social imaginaries were based on the law of the people or hierarchical complementarity, modern Western imaginary is animated by an image of moral order based on the mutual benefit of equal participants which has been reached through theories of natural law and social contract theories of the seventeenth century thinkers, Hugo Grotius and John Locke. Gaonkar does however point out that, 'As the older [hierarchical] images faded and became marginalized, they continued to have some residual hold in cultural spaces such as family and gender relations' (Gaonkar, 2002:11).To those working in the field of violence against women this hold is more than residual, and, while often hidden, it is still quite considerable. However according to Taylor the 'long march' is underway and the 'new image, incubated in the Grotian-Lockean theory, steadily permeates and saturates a social imaginary' (Gaonkar, 2002:11). As this happens, he conjectures that new cultural forms, symbolic expressions, and institutional practices emerge, or old ones are modified and acquire new meanings (see Gaonkar, 2002:11).

In spite of Taylor's optimism concerning progress to societies of equality, when

considering the place of women in modern social imaginaries, it is interesting that the three key cultural forms for Taylor are the economy, the public sphere, and the self-governing people, and these are, in many cultures, still areas where women are less visible and have less agency than men.

In this Chapter I have noted the extent of research into causes of violence against women and the difficulties in obtaining clear data and actually hearing women's real experiences. Having sought for a fresh approach to this issue I am drawn to Chopp's suggestion that a poetics of testimony, in and through literature, might give a voice to those who suffer this way - such that there might be change. I have begun to get a sense of how literature/poetics might operate in this process through the creative work of metaphor and have outlined how change might occur at the level of the social imaginary of a society and what this might mean for embodied practice in that society.

Chapter 2

Testimony

> *Within its limits, it seems to me that this episode illustrates quite well the gap that exists and grows wider every year between things as they are represented by the current imagination ... it is part of our difficulty or inability to perceive the experience of others, which is all the more pronounced the further these experiences are from ours in time, space or quality .*
> Primo Levi responding to a question as to why he had not managed to escape from Auschwitz

> *Everything was screened. You couldn't see anything to left or right. You couldn't see through it* ('Eye witness' in *Shoah* in Felman, 1992b:209).

At this point I recall attention to one of the issues at stake in this study, namely the violence perpetrated on women, because they are women, by men, which occurs in every culture in some form, and the concern that this truth is not yet recognised and responded to in dominant cultural discourses. I ask if this lack of recognition, and indeed the lack of any effective preventative strategy being enacted in any society to date, is because there are not the mechanisms, there are not forums, for testimony to these acts to emerge in a form that makes them credible to society. Or is such knowledge well enough known but suppressed or ignored by those whose interests are best served by it remaining obscured?

In the light of these questions, I move to explore how testimony and witness to trauma might surface. Indeed, can survivors of trauma, often reduced to muteness by their experiences, robbed of any sense of wholeness and selfhood, formulate lucid testimony at all? I have then, a concern about how hard it is for such trauma to be testified to in a straightforward coherent narrative, and will explore how those things that are unspeakable might be 'spoken' in other ways. I also ask whether such

testimony as might be made, can of itself bring about social/cultural change such that this type of violence will lessen, or does this kind of change require something beyond testimony? In order to engage with these questions I propose to examine some recent traditions of 'witness' in the aftermath of trauma, some post-Holocaust survivor testimony, and testimony to sexual abuse. I then turn to the work of the poet Paul Celan as an example of a writer who wrestled with speaking the unspeakable.

In engaging with the work of Celan I continue looking at and questioning the part that art, particularly in the form of literature of different forms, might play in such a process. My contention is that to understand and change the present situation as regards violence perpetrated on women, it is important to look to first-hand testimony to establish the facts, and to map the extent and severity of such violence. It is also vital to break open and disrupt current understandings and interpretation of gender relations and indeed other self/other relations that lead to violence and to ask whether this can be achieved solely by the surfacing of narrative testimony, or whether a deeper and more long lasting destabilising of patriarchal discourses might not be achieved, if only in part, by the subtle effect of literature on cultural mores. Seeking to answer these questions, I begin by exploring the kind of power inherent in what Chopp (as discussed in the previous chapter) has called the 'poetics of testimony'.

What is testimony?

In the book *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis and History,* which she wrote with Dori Laub, Shoshana Felman speaks of what it means to witness and of the rhetorical element that characterizes the giving of testimony.

> To bear witness is to take responsibility for truth: to speak, implicitly from within the legal pledge and the judicial imperative of the witness oath. To testify - before a court of law or before the court of history and of the future; to testify likewise, before an audience of readers or spectators – is more than

> simply to report a fact or an event or to relate what has been lived, recorded and remembered. Memory is conjured here essentially in order to *address* another, to impress upon a listener, to *appeal* to a community. To testify is always metaphorically to take the witness stand, or to take the position of the witness insofar as the narrative account of witness is at once engaged in an appeal and bound by an oath (Felman, 1992b:204).

Felman also stresses the significance of the embodied nature of testimony - the weight carried by *this* story, told by *this* person. She asks,

> But if the essence of the testimony is impersonal (to enable a decision by a judge or jury - metaphorical or literal - about the true nature of the facts of an occurrence; to enable an objective reconstruction of what history was like, irrespective of the witness), why is it that the witnesses speech is so uniquely, literally irreplaceable? (Felman, 1992b:205).

I would suggest that the significance of the embodied nature of testimony noted here by Felman, possibly lies in the encounter that it entails with the 'face of the irreplaceable and unique other'[10] and the obligation that this carries, in Levinas's terms.

To explore the nature and content of witness literature, and, in fact, the very possibility or impossibility of adequate testimony to trauma, I turn initially to the event that holds a unique place in Western psyche and review some aspects of the emergence of testimony to the Holocaust and the way in which the event of the Holocaust has been remembered or forgotten. I do this in the hope that consideration of the effects of what is sometimes regarded in Western culture as an unparalleled event will shed light on some key aspects of testimony to other forms of traumatic

[10] Levinas's use of the compelling motif of 'the face' will be explored further in Chapter 4. While Levinas did not use 'face' literally, an encounter with embodied testimony would bring with it the experience he encompasses in this term.

experience. In the light of this I will then examine the emergence of narratives of the experiences of survivors of sexual abuse and incest that appeared to accompany the rise of feminist consciousness in the United States in the 1970s and 80s.

Since in doing so, I *do* also intend to make comparisons between the way the Holocaust was experienced, and the experience of other forms of abuse, in particular sustained and culturally ubiquitous violence against women, I need to answer the charge of those who see the Holocaust as a unique and incomparable event, and believe that to use it as a 'case study' is in some way a betrayal of the memory of victims.

The Uniqueness of the Holocaust

To even suggest that it is possible at some level to talk of the experience of the Holocaust as if it were on par with other 'disasters' that befall individuals is difficult. There has been a contention that to detract from the unique status of the Holocaust might be in some way to diminish the horror of what was experienced by so many victims at that time. However, I will undertake such a comparison, in the belief that working from the model of testimony to the Holocaust, an extreme example of abuse of the 'other', will shed significant light on how witness to violence against women in its various manifestations might find a more effective voice.

Kali Tal discusses the uniqueness or otherwise of the Holocaust in her book *Worlds of Hurt* (1996) in which she examines literature of trauma born out of three situations and their representation in contemporary U.S. culture: the Holocaust, the Vietnam War and sexual abuse of women and children. I note here a point to which I return later, which is the difficulty of comparing sexual abuse of women and children prevalent as it is across cultures and periods of history, with trauma engendered by events like the Holocaust and the Vietnam War, which are seen as discrete in time and geographically specific (even while acknowledging that the repercussions and

consequences of these two events are felt down through generations and that there is some difficulty in saying where they begin and end). I will go on to note the differences between the way in which perception of the experiences of victims and survivors of the Holocaust have entered cultural consciousness and the way in which we have knowledge (or lack knowledge) of the experiences of uncounted victims and survivors of the much more diffuse phenomenon of violence against women.

Discussing the uniqueness or otherwise of the Holocaust as a site for trauma Tal says,

> The force of the Holocaust as precedent and yardstick to measure trauma in contemporary US culture, and the influence of the Holocaust survivor on the perceived legitimacy and interpretation of the statements of survivors of other traumas has never to my knowledge been discussed in print before. To seriously undertake such a project, we must *disregard* the cultural prohibition against profaning the sacred. We must demystify the Holocaust, reducing it once again, to a series of historical and cultural events on par with other cultural and historical events and therefore undeserving of a capital H' (Tal, 1996:8 emphasis added).

She goes on to concur with Miriam Greenspan's belief that 'The view of the Holocaust as Sacred Event... goes along with a decided ignorance of the forces of fascism and anti-Semitism, not only as they existed in World War II Europe but as they exist in the world today' (Greenspan, 1990 in Tal, 1996:8). Thus Tal would have the Holocaust reduced from 'holy object' to something that happened in history.

I see this move by Tal to 'demystify' the Holocaust as not being intended to diminish or belittle the suffering of victims and survivors of that event. It is rather an attempt to legitimate her move to bring what is learnt from trying to hear and understand testimony from such victims and survivors to bear on other abusive situations.

Tina Chanter effectively expresses the challenge of how best to remember the Holocaust, thus:

> We cannot allow our capacity for thought to be satisfied by either transforming the Shoah into something manageable, taming it, relegating it to history, or distancing ourselves from it through avoidance or ignorance, nor can we merely elevate it into an event that defies our categories for thinking, thereby placing it outside the scope of our enquiry and refusing its enormity. In neither case have we begun to accept the necessity of thinking the impossible. We have turned away from the responsibility of thinking impossibility (Chanter, 1998:2).

The suggestion that I am making is that we can learn more from the event and the aftermath of the Holocaust if we do not set it apart as something totally unique, but rather note and learn from the characteristics it has in common with those other events we might refer to as holocausts, without a capital 'H'. Within such other holocausts, in our time we might designate Cambodia, Bosnia, Rwanda and Darfur. I would also want to include the maiming, terrorizing and killing of women and girls, constantly and consistently across cultures and generations. I would want to name the phenomenon of violence against women as a holocaust, in order to bring the scale and seriousness of it to universal attention. With regard to this phenomenon of gender specific violence, I would contend that society at all levels needs to take on the responsibility of 'thinking impossibility' and fully grasp the scale and the epidemic nature of the problem.

Allowing ourselves, then, to take Holocaust witness literature as a powerful model of testimony to trauma, I turn to the work of Susan Gubar who traces its emergence over time and the factors that hindered or facilitated it emerging into general consciousness and in doing so will draw out comparable factors that hinder or facilitate testimony to

violence against women.

The 'dying' of the Holocaust

In her book *Poetry After Auschwitz,* Gubar traces what she calls the dying of the Holocaust. She marks the stages of witness and remembrance since the end of World War II, and notes that, to begin with, trauma rendered survivors speechless. (see Gubar, 2003:2). She quotes from Robert J Lifton's work on catastrophic experiences where he documented 'decreased or absent feeling either during or after trauma' a protective 'numbing' that sealed survivors in speechlessness (interview by Caruth in Gubar, 2003:2). This understanding is reinforced by survivor Aharon Appelfeld, who refers to what happened as being 'so gigantic, so inconceivable, that the witness even seemed like a fabricator to himself' (Appelfeld, 1988: 86 in Gubar 2003:2).

This point is also made by Laub where he says '...what made a Holocaust out of the event is the unique way in which, during its historical occurrence, *the event produced no witnesses*' (Laub, 1992b:80). He claims this is due not only to the Nazis extermination of witnesses, but also to the 'inherently incomprehensible *and* deceptively psychological structure of the event' which 'precluded its own witnessing, even by its very victims' (Laub, 1992b:80).

Laub argues that the perpetrators of the Holocaust created a situation that it was impossible to give clear and credible witness to, via imposition of 'a delusional ideology, whose grandiose coercive pressure totally excluded and eliminated the possibility of an unviolated, unencumbered, and thus sane point of reference in the witness' (Laub, 1992b:81).[11] This was part of their own attempt to rationalise the unprecedented scope of their destructiveness. As Laub goes on to say,

[11] This point will be addressed again in the discussion of the film *Shoah*

> ... it was ... the very circumstance of *being inside the event* that made unthinkable the very notion that a witness could exist, that is someone who could step outside of the coercively totalitarian and dehumanising frame of reference in which the event was taking place, and provide an independent frame of reference through which the event could be observed (Laub, 1992:81).

Added to the numbing, silencing shock created in survivors by the surreal proportions of the horror there appears to have often been among survivors a resolve to rebuild their fractured lives, to move out of the shadow of such horror and death and this also contributed to the 'forgetting' of the Holocaust in the forties and fifties (see Gubar, 2003:2). This too, is a possible response of survivors who have 'moved through' other traumas such as sexual abuse; to want to forget, to shut out the abuse and 'move on'. In this way witness to these realities is stifled and does not emerge into full cultural consciousness.

Looking at this early period of Holocaust testimony, Gubar notes that, from the first, the reality of the Shoah was also denied by anti-Semites, who disavowed the atrocities or blamed them on the victim (see Gubar, 2003:2-3). Such denial of the existence and/or scale of violence perpetrated against women, and even when recognised, the tendency to blame victims for their victimisation is a common feature of many responses to testimony to violence from women.

Gubar identifies the next phase in Holocaust history as being when the moves of the various groups that were attempting to nullify the Holocaust were brought to public attention and countered by the first generation of Holocaust studies advocates (see Gubar, 2003:3). It was then from the nineteen seventies onwards that writers in the field of Holocaust literature explored the significance of those voices we now associate with the Holocaust canon such as Primo Levi, Anne Frank, Paul Celan, Nelly Sachs and others (see Gubar, 2003:3). The emphasis this first generation of

scholars placed on the value of remembering led to the establishment of archives, memorials and museums around the world. Noting this point in Gubar's analysis of Holocaust remembrance, I am aware that testimony to violence against women has never, in spite of its long history, had the public acknowledgement of archives, memorials and museums confirming its importance and validity, and offering physical spaces for communal remembrance, although there have been some attempts in recent times to raise the profile of the issue in this way.[12]

Gubar claims that in spite of this kind of public acknowledgement, the Holocaust was still dying throughout the seventies, eighties and nineties and she speculates that this was due in part to an issue I have already addressed, namely the insistence of some in keeping it alive as a 'singular event in history - not merely unprecedented, but inexplicable and unrepresentable' (Gubar, 2003:3). She claims that 'if the earlier period threatened to erase the Shoah in a killing silence, the first generation of Holocaust historians buried it in the European past by claiming it could not be compared to any other phenomenon or should be approached only by those personally involved'(Gubar, 2003:3). Offering examples of this approach Gubar quotes Alvin Rosenfeld who claimed 'To generalize or universalize the victims of the Holocaust is not only to profane their memories, but to exonerate their executioners' (Rosenfeld, 1980 in Gubar, 2003:3) and Berel Lang who made the more extreme claim that all 'figurative representation of genocide will diminish the moral understanding' (Lang, 1990 in Gubar, 2003:3).

Illustrating that there was a valid point being made by these writers, a further stage in the loss of testimony to the profound reality of the Holocaust is the way in which these experiences came to be represented by succeeding generations which had not

[12] Examples of this include an annual period of 16 Days from Nov. 25th to Dec. 10th dedicated to campaigning on the issue of Violence Against Women world-wide. In Scotland this has been marked by an exhibition of 104 pairs of shoes, some belonging to celebrities to highlight the fact that two women a week are killed in the UK by partners or ex-partners. In 2005 The gallery of Modern Art in Glasgow, Scotland, mounted an exhibition 'Rule of Thumb' of work by American artist Barbara Kruger addressing issues of power and control in relation to gender and politics.

actually experienced such events. The problem was that even the best-intentioned artistic and educational presentations could in no way convey the full horror of the Holocaust, and audiences might fail to respond to what Gubar calls 'a closed set of recycled artefacts reaping commercial gains from horrendous losses' (Gubar, 2003:4). Using Patricia Yaeger's phrase, for Gubar there is a danger of 'consuming trauma', of converting grievous suffering into rhetorical pleasure or professional profit (see Gubar 2003:4). She asserts that,

> Just as the memory of the Holocaust was being interred with the aging generation who were its immediate witness, TV programmes and best selling novels, fictionalized biographies and popular films jeopardized that history by commodifying or fetishizing events that continued to recede further from view (Gubar, 2003:5).

She potently describes this process as 'turning what originally shocked into schlock…' or by the tasteless parody, 'There's no business like Shoah business'(see Gubar, 2003:6).[13]

Thus we are alerted by Gubar to several stages in 'the dying' of the Holocaust, the first being, as I have noted, where the weight of silence, the problem of speaking the unspeakable, threatened to wipe out memory. The next stage was characterised by an insistence on the uniqueness of the event which meant that only those who had direct experience of it were thought fit to witness to it and then only in particular ways. A third method of killing the Holocaust lay in the proliferation of banal or facile reconstructions that repackaged the past to fit contemporary ideological or political agendas. [14]

[13] See also discussion in Sophia Marshman 'From the Margins to the Mainstream? Representations of the Holocaust in Popular Culture', eSharp. Issue 6:1 2005.
[14] The effect of the form in which witness to trauma is 'packaged' for public consumption, will also be discussed when reviewing witness to sexual abuse.

All in all we are left with Chanter's quandary, with regard to remembering the event of the Holocaust and the experiences of its victims, as to how to think the impossible, and how to represent that impossible to ourselves and to those who come after us. As I have suggested, thinking the impossible and representing the impossible to ourselves is also an urgent challenge with regard to women victims and survivors of male violence.

I have already suggested that witness to trauma, the attempt to represent the impossible, might find more effective expression through some form of art or literature, than through an attempt at a purely factual account, and in the case of the Holocaust, the film *Shoah* offers something of that possibility. Although the film is a documentary it nevertheless is a work of art.

Shoah as a case study in the art of witnessing

In her book *Testimony,* Felman devotes a chapter to the impact of the film *Shoah* as a form of Holocaust witness. *Shoah* is a film made by Claude Lanzmann consisting exclusively of interviews conducted with survivors, ex-Nazis and bystanders who were present to the unfolding of the horror of the Holocaust. The interview process took place over the eleven years that preceded the production of the film: that is 1974 -1985.

Examining the operation of witness testimony to the Holocaust via the medium of an art form such as film will highlight a number of factors also involved in allowing witness to violence against women to surface.

I have already noted the difficulties for victims of experiences at such a limit of reality, in comprehending what is happening, and Felman sees *Shoah* as providing witness to a catastrophe, as testifying to what she calls limit-experiences 'whose overwhelming impact constantly puts to the test the limits of the witness and of

witnessing, at the same time that it constantly unsettles and puts into question the very limits of reality' (Felman, 1992b:205).

This discussion of the poetics of testimony began with the understanding that in the Western legal, philosophical and epistemological tradition, witness testimony is regarded as being based on first-hand seeing – a reporting of what the witness was present to. In *Shoah* Lanzmann reveals that there can be profound differences in the way witnesses may experience and see (or miss seeing) a particular event. He documents three distinct groups of witnesses: victims, perpetrators and bystanders. As Felman comments, between these groups '....there is an *incommensurability* of different topographical and cognitive positions, between which the discrepancy cannot be breached' (Felman, 1992b:208). It is instructive that these three groups, victims, perpetrators and bystanders, are differentiated not so much by what they see, but by what they do not see and how they *fail to witness.*

In *Shoah* it is apparent that victims see but do not understand the significance of what they see; '...the Jews fail to read, or to decipher, the visual signs and the visible significance they nonetheless see with their own eyes' (Felman, 1992b: 208). The bystanders (in *Shoah* these are the Poles) '*do* see, but as bystanders, they do not quite *look*, they avoid *looking* directly, and thus they overlook at once their responsibility and their complicity as witnesses'(Felman, 1992b:208). The perpetrators (Nazis) see to it that both the Jews and the extermination will remain unseen, invisible: for example, the death camps are surrounded for that purpose, with a screen of trees. As a witness interviewed in *Shoah* explained, 'Everything was screened. You couldn't see anything to the left or right. You couldn't see through it' (Felman, 1992b:209).

We might remember here the similar positioning of witnesses to violence against women especially when considering instances of domestic violence. In any such incident it is possible to identify the roles of victim, bystander and perpetrator. The victim will often feel very isolated; unable to set what she experiences in a wider

context, often blaming her situation on her own shortcomings, and not 'seeing' clearly the reality of the situation.

Although domestic violence is know to happen 'behind closed doors' and 'bystander witness' might be thought to be scarce, neighbours will often hear assaults and friends, family and neighbours may be aware of injuries and changes in behaviour of victims. How these bystanders see (or manage not to see) this evidence of abuse is important to the truth of such situations becoming known. Response to such evidence as it is presented to bystanders ears and eyes is often conditioned by societies' norms, such as regarding what goes on in a man's house as his private affair or, in some societies, a condoning of violently dominant masculinity. There is, of course, often another group of witnesses to domestic violence – the children. However, their position in society means they are not regarded as credible witnesses and they themselves may be too traumatised by the situations they witness, to become part of the process of giving testimony; indeed they may themselves become victims as well as witnesses.

With regard to the perpetrators of domestic violence, they often appear to screen from themselves, and from those outside, the true nature of what is happening. Injuries are often inflicted to parts of the body which will not be seen. Other explanations will be given to health professionals as regards injuries, such as the classic "She walked into a door".[15]

The question of language being used to misdirect, downplay or conceal the truth in this fashion is raised by Felman.[16] In her discussion of *Shoah*, she draws attention to the use of language in the process of victimisation and the way in which manipulation of language may distort the credibility of witness. She claims that the essence of the Nazi scheme was to make Jews invisible. Even in death, the bodies were reduced to

[15] An effective insight into living with such violence can be gained from the novel by Roddy Doyle *The Woman who Walked into Doors*, Vintage 2007.
[16] See Elaine Scarry on distortions of language at following pp55-56.

smoke and ashes and before this final erasure, the prisoners were made to refer to them as *figuren.* As a witness says;

> The Germans forbade us to us the words corpse or victim. The dead were blocks of wood, shit. The Germans made us refer to the bodies as *figuren,* that is, as puppets, as dolls, or as *Schmattes* which means rags (Felman, 1992b:210).

Felman comments 'The dead bodies are thus *verbally* rendered invisible, and voided both of substance and specificity' (Felman, 1992b:210).

In similar vein the way in which language is used in relation to violence against women has an impact on the visibility of victims. Until recent times domestic violence was often dismissed by police in the UK as "just a domestic", a situation which was classified as a private, family affair requiring no public acknowledgement or investigation.[17] Victims of domestic violence have been spoken of as mad or immoral. Perpetrators, particularly those of a fundamentalist religious background may describe domestic violence as necessary *discipline* for the victims' own good, and style themselves as an instrument of salvation for the woman concerned.

Felman also raises the crucial question of what history allows to be remembered. With reference to *Shoah,* she claims that 'Knowledge is shown by the film to be absolutely necessary in the ongoing struggle to resist the blinding impact of the event, to counteract the splitting of eyewitnessing. But knowledge is not in and of itself, a sufficiently active and sufficiently effective act of seeing' (Felman, 1992b:214). She claims that there can be no ultimately objective account of what happened, asserting, that all are ignorant with respect to what actually happened in history and that this is not an ignorance that can be dispelled by history, in fact history is encompassed by it.

[17] Recent changes in police training and practice in the UK has helped to enable accounts of abuse to be treated seriously, and named as criminal acts.

She claims that historiography is shown by the film to be 'as much the product of the passion of forgetting as it is the product of the passion of remembering' (Felman, 1992b:214).[18]

A clear example of the role of history, or at least official state-sanctioned history, in perpetuating abuse and silencing the testimony of victims is that of the experience of the Korean 'comfort women', an estimated 200,000 of whom were taken by the Japanese army to be sex slaves in World War II, but whose experience was completely erased from written history of the time (see Howard 1995 and Graham 1998:252).

As Tal claims in this respect, there is a need when engaging with literature by members of survivor groups to 'deconstruct the process by which the dominant culture codifies their traumatic experience' (Tal, 1996: 18). She points up the fact that the testimony survivors give to their experiences is always in a specific social, cultural, political and historical context. 'Their location within the complex network of communal relations determines the way in which their testimony is received and the interpretive and revisionary pressures that will be brought to bear on their traumatic experience' (Tal, 1996:18).[19] This representation of the survivors' traumatic experience then becomes a 'tool in the hands of those who shape public perceptions and national myth' (Tal, 1996:19).

Also of importance for the surfacing of effective witness to overwhelming trauma is the fact that testimony, as seen in *Shoah*, is anchored to small details rather than offering an overview of the Holocaust, which, as has been indicated, was not possible for victims. As an interviewer, Lanzmann asks not for great explanations of the

[18] As Paul Antze and Michael Lambek have expressed it in their book *Tense Past*, 'the past does not correspond to the real in any direct, unmediated way, since what we remember are memories – screens always already impressed by the fantasies or distortions of a series of successive rememberings. Hence memories, like dreams, are highly condensed symbols of hidden preoccupations' (Antze and Lambek 1996: xii).

[19] See also Graham, 1998:263

Holocaust, but for concrete descriptions of minute particular details, for specifics of weather, scenery, shapes and colours; things which might seem trivial (see Felman, 1992b:218).

'It is not the big generalizations' claims Felman, 'but the concrete particulars which translate into a vision and thus help both to dispel the blinding impact of the event and to transgress the silence to which the splitting of eyewitnessing reduced the witness (Felman, 1992b:219). It is through naming and noting such seeming trivia, that the witness can find a voice, otherwise silenced by the overwhelming scale of the event.[20]

Thus, the film *Shoah* resists suggesting that there is any coherent conceptual frame into which these fragments of witness might fit. In this respect it performs a 'double task of the breaking of the silence and of the simultaneous shattering of any given discourse, of the breaking – or the bursting open – of all frames'[21] (Felman, 1992b: 224).

Again, comparing the possibilities for witness to violence against women and such a witness as *Shoah* provides to the Holocaust, it is instructive that there has never been anything like this film recording the experiences of abused women in such a careful and dedicated fashion, with such attention to detail as found in *Shoah*. While there are some public information films with regard to domestic violence, for example, there is nothing that has the status or exposure of a film like *Shoah* that would allow the many thousands of survivors of violence against women a voice and allow the precise detail of their experiences to enter public consciousness.

There is then, as already signalled, a major difficulty related to testimony to profound trauma of whatever kind, which is highlighted by the experience of making the film

[20] Testimony by 'comfort women' recorded in Keith Howard's book *True Stories of the Korean Comfort Women* similarly deals in small details in the womens' accounts of their experiences.
[21] Such shattering of existing discourses is a compelling characterisation of the fiction of J.M. Coetzee, whose work I employ as a 'case study' later in this project.

Shoah, and that is the difficulty inherent in both witnessing from *inside* the event and to witnessing the event from *outside* and the decided threshold that exists between these two subject positions. *Shoah* raises the question of what it would mean to witness from *inside* the death camp, and the answers to this question shed light on issues raised for women who might witness from *inside* a situation of violence and abuse.

> Testifying from inside a death camp would mean, at the same time, equally impossibly, the necessity of *testifying from inside the absolute constraint of a fatal secret,* a secret that is felt to be so binding, so compelling and so terrible that it often is kept secret even from oneself (Felman, 1992b:228).

There is a parallel quandary at the heart of the problem of gaining knowledge about violence against women. One of the results in escalating and ongoing domestic abuse can be a complete loss of a sense of self and objectivity with regard to the situation for the victim. As I have noted, in such a situation the perpetrator will often construct an alternative reality, in which their behaviour appears to have some logical, even benign, purpose and credibility.[22]

Viewing the victim's experience as complete Otherness, Felman again turns to the question of language. She asks

> *How to testify from inside Otherness?*...to speak from within the Other's tongue insofar precisely as the *tongue of the Other* is by definition the very tongue *we* do not speak, the tongue that by its very nature and position, one by definition *does not understand.* To testify from inside Otherness is to bear witness from inside the living pathos of a tongue which nonetheless is bound to be heard as mere noise. It is therefore impossible to testify from inside otherness, or from inside the keeping of a secret, from inside amnesia or from

[22] See Orr, 2000 for first-hand accounts of destruction of objectivity in the survivors of abuse.

> inside deception and the delusion of coercive self-deception, in much the same way as it is impossible to testify, precisely, from inside death. It is impossible to testify from the inside because *the inside has no voice* [23] and this is what the film is attempting to convey and communicate to us. From within, the inside is unintelligible, it is *not present to itself* (Felman, 1992b:230-231).

Ultimately for Felman, the film *Shoah* is about the relation between truth and this threshold between the inside and the outside: about the impossibility of telling the truth in a straight-forward manner and about the consequent need nonetheless to recover the truth precisely by crossing over, bridging in some way, this threshold between the world and the world of the camps and of the crematoria. Felman claims that by means of the film, Lanzmann manages to cross the threshold and take the inside outside. She says that 'Lanzmann hopes, by means of the resources of his art, to have an impact on the outside from the inside ... to make, historically and ethically, a difference' (Felman, 1992b:239).

As part of this ongoing comparison of women's experience of violence and abuse, and the Holocaust as experienced by victims and survivors, it is instructive to note that the otherness, the 'unintelligible inside' of this experience for abused women is often physically situated, not in an alien environment such as a camp, but in a familiar place of home, neighbourhood, street or workplace. This familiar space, that might be expected to be safe, is transformed by the disorienting and shattering nature of the abuse into an alien and foreign land.

I note also the issue that exists for many abused and violated women, of how to narrate the 'impossible' nature of their experience and re-situate those they witness to who are outside, to the inside of their experience. This can be particularly acute in the case of victims of domestic abuse or child abuse, because they may feel that they

[23] This theme of the silence and voice of 'the other' is one that is present in a number of Coetzee's novels, particularly *Foe* and I explore it in the later discussion of his work.

alone are living through this experience. One important enabling factor for the giving voice to testimony is knowledge that there is a community of victims/survivors who understand what is witnessed to and who can fill silences and gaps in testimony from their own experiences. This giving of a voice to a *community* of victims/survivors will seen to be part of the process of the emergence of testimony to sexual abuse of women and girls that I will now trace.

Witness to Sexual Abuse

Moving from the Holocaust to another significant arena for the emergence of witness testimony, I review the witness to incest and sexual abuse which found its voice in the latter half of the 20th century in the USA.

The first published editions of incest and rape narratives in the United States, appeared in the mid to late 1970s and early 1980s. The emerging women's movement of that period led to a raising of feminist consciousness which in part created conditions under which these personal trauma narratives could surface in the public domain. These narratives of female sexual abuse survivors bore witness to the fact that violence was perpetrated systematically and regularly by American men on American women in a society that appeared covertly to support the oppression and subjugation of women. In her book *Worlds of Hurt,* Tal speaks of a US context 'where violence against women is the rule rather than the exception'[24] (Tal, 1996:136-137).

Not only did the feminist movement of the 1960s and 1970s created an atmosphere in which it was possible for some women to begin to talk more openly about sexual assault among themselves, but it also became possible for them to begin to 'connect

[24] 'The most comprehensive study of incest and sexual abuse of young women suggests that 38% of American women have had at least one experience of incestuous and/or extra-familial sexual abuse before reaching the age of eighteen. These experiences involved actual sexual contact with a child. If broader definitions, which included attempted contact and exhibitionism, were applied, 54% of women aged eighteen and under have been incestuously abused. These figures, combined with the statistics on rape of adult women, present a horrifying picture of a society where violence against women is the rule rather than the exception' (Tal, 1996:136-137).

that assault to political, racial, economic and social issues within the framework of the patriarchal system in which they lived' (Tal, 1996:155). (This was the time of such works as Nelle Morton's *The Journey is Home* (1985) with its motif of 'hearing women into speech'). Earlier Susan Brownmiller's ground-breaking work *Against Our Will: Men Women and Rape* (1975) had highlighted this connection between sexual assault and other forms of oppression (see Tal, 1996:155) This situation formed the back-drop to the publication of the first mass market volume of incest narrative, Louise Armstrong's *Kiss Daddy Goodnight*, in 1978.

In her account, Tal notes the thousands of Holocaust narratives and hundreds of Vietnam War narratives, but points up the fact that in 1989 when she began to research sexual abuse testimony literature, there were fewer than a dozen autobiographies that could be described as self-conscious sexual assault narratives (see Tal, 1996:156). In the period since her research began, many autobiographical accounts of such abuse have emerged.

Initially there was optimism and hope invested in the process of witnessing itself. It would appear that the women who contributed to and edited these early sexual abuse survivor narratives were determined to break the silence that shrouded incest and rape. Theirs was to be a first step in a challenge to the laws and social conditions that protected sexually abusive men. They gathered together in small groups, to talk, to engage in writers workshops and to support one another in the publication of their testimonies. They were brought to the realisation, however, that 'testimony signals the *beginning* of a long process of struggle towards change, rather than effecting the change by itself' (Tal, 1996:156).

Well intentioned though these groups were, they were also predominately white and middle class, and displayed the initially unacknowledged racism and ethnocentrism that characterised much of the feminist activism of the period (see Tal, 1996:156). As

Tal comments

> When the first anthologies of sexual abuse survivor testimony appeared, narratives by women of color were ignored, decontextualised or appropriated. In this way even this breaking of silence reinscribed cultural patterns of discrimination (Tal, 1996:156).

This alerts us again to the interaction between cultural patterns and the ease or difficulty with which witness testimony is able to surface and the form that it takes.

Such testimonies that emerged and were published in 1980s were directed both at a wider readership that did not know or admit to themselves, the extent and devastating impact of sexual abuse upon women and children and to a smaller audience who knew only too well the impact of the problem through their own personal experiences of sexual abuse, but were unaware that they shared their distress and anger with many other women (see Tal,1996:160). Also, as I will explore, the audience for the narratives was dictated to some extent by the kind of publishers who produced them. It is apparent that these early sexual assault narratives were frequently published by feminist presses, which suggests that the audience was understood to be 'predominantly female, largely feminist, largely white and that it contained a number of lesbian readers' (Tal, 1996:160).

Armstrong's *Kiss Daddy Goodnight* was the first mass market publication in the US. to declare outright that its subject was incest and that the author was a survivor. It brought to public consciousness the fact that such a crime could be committed by a 'normal' man in a 'normal' family (see Tal, 1996:161). In the US context particularly, *Kiss Daddy Goodnight* broke the silence that surrounded incest and child sexual abuse and suggested for the first time that sexually abused women might find a distinctive voice and a community of fellow survivors with which to identify. It would appear that Armstrong's testimony evoked a positive response from many readers and the

book had a lasting effect on the self-perception of many sexually abused women (see Tal, 1996:168).

As with Holocaust testimony, so it is with incest survivors' narratives, that there are many ways to 'package' such witness, and the forms in which they are presented to the wider public impact on their effectiveness or otherwise in bringing about social change. Illustrating this point, Tal charts the courses of two early anthologies witnessing to incest and highlights differences between them. *Voices in the Night* (1982) (hereafter referred to as VIN) and *I Never Told Anyone* (1983) (hereafter referred to as INTA) were aimed at different markets and each book witnesses to incest in a particular and distinct fashion.

VIN originated in a lesbian writers' group to which both of its editors belonged, and many of its contributions are characterised by what Tal calls 'a clear feminist consciousness and a distinct lesbian voice' (Tal,1996:168). In contrast, INTA, published by Harper and Row, was intended for a wider general audience. Also feminist in its political stance and the product of a women's' writing group, INTA however, is more restrained than VIN and more preoccupied with proving its witnesses credible and true, than with simply allowing their testimony to speak for itself. In comparing the two books, Tal notes that 'Ellen Bass and Louise Thornton [editors of INTA] may have been under some pressure from Harper and Row ... to "sanitize" their presentation of incest, or at least to package it in a form which would mitigate the hostile responses of potential mainstream readers' (Tal, 1996:169).

Of the book VIN, Tal says

> The authors believe their book represents an attempt to "redefine the parameters of our world," creating a space in which women's pain can be heard and attended to. Such an attempt is, they admit, hampered by the

> patriarchal power structure, which deprives them of the right to speak and resist (Tal, 1996:171).

She goes on to note that the message of oppression and struggle inscribed in VIN is made powerful because of its apparent universality.

> *All* women, the authors make clear, suffer the injuries inflicted by patriarchy. McNaron and Morgan, by refusing to take the editorial privilege of contextualizing each selection, create a book where all voices carry the same authority. We speak for each other, they seem to suggest, and each speaks for all in her own way (Tal, 1996:176).

Tal goes on to highlight differences in cover design, cover recommendations, target audiences and the 'voice' of each of these volumes and to link these differences to the way in which the books were received. She notes that The Personal Narratives Group of the University of Minnesota argues that 'the production and dissemination of personal narratives is grounded in power relationships, and that both ethical and factual questions are involved in the process of packaging womens' personal narratives for public consumption' (The Personal Narratives Group,1989:13 in Tal, 1996:181). By making this detailed comparison between the two anthologies, Tal effectively draws attention to the fact that the form in which testimonies emerge is of particular significance and will affect the impact they have, and the political uses to which they are put.

From her review of these two publications we see that in VIN, voices are 'active and assertive calling out loudly in the darkness' (Tal, 1996:180). The proactive stance of the title is reinforced by the strong subtitle, *Women Speaking About Incest.* By contrast, in INTA the use of passive, introverted, first person voices 'isolates the survivors from each other, and suggests that the act of breaking silence is both frightened and furtive, a whisper rather than a shout' (Tal, 1996:181). The subtitle

continues to use the passive voice: *Writings by Women Survivors of Child Sexual Abuse* (see Tal, 1996:181).

While VIN is packaged as a "silence breaking book" potentially useful in feminist therapy, INTA is a promoted as 'a "deeply moving collection" which is "compelling and poignant". The reader is invited to learn of the "fear, anger, pain and love" of these women, and of their "struggles to come to terms with the silence that allowed such abuse"' (Tal, 1996:181). INTA is presented to the reader as a 'fascinating, emotionally involving look at the painful lives of other people, in terms not too terribly different from those which are used to sell romance novels, war novels and other works of literature that allow readers to live vicariously' (Tal, 1996:181).[25]

Editorial interpretation of INTA appears to reflect certain institutional constraints and a particular political agenda. Mainstream publishers need books they can successfully market. They are required to seek a larger audience than the community of self-consciously feminist, woman orientated incest survivors. Tal points out that 'a defining characteristic of incest is the fact that no one wants to talk about it or hear about it' (Tal, 1996:182). According to Tal, Thornton and Bass (editors) and Harper and Row publishers of INTA, appear to feel that they must make incest narratives seem at the same time both 'safe and appealing' (Tal, 1996:182).

In order to sell the book INTA to a publisher, Thornton and Bass play down the frequency of abuse by a family member, and give more emphasis to assaults by strangers. Contextualised in this way the challenge to rape and abuse mythology raised by these stories becomes diluted. Furthermore, Tal claims 'the book's therapeutic structure places abused women within the framework of mental illness' (Tal, 1996: 183), to a degree making the victim once again the problem. Tal notes that

[25] Tal notes that similar descriptions of Elie Wiesel's *Night* were offered when it appeared. It was described as "penetrating and powerful", "personal", "terrifying", "shocking" and "unforgettable" (Tal, 1996:182).

> By making it clear that child sexual abuse has dramatic effects upon its victims and by advocating that women seek counselling, advice and support from professionals and therapy groups, Thornton and Bass create the impression that the survivors are weak, harmless and "sick", - no threat to the status quo. Thornton and Bass emphasize that women need "healing." They do not mention that many women survivors of child sexual abuse also believe that they need revolution (Tal, 1996:183).

In VIN, McNaron and Morgan describe something of the process necessary for effective surfacing of witness to sexual abuse. The first step is to translate the hugely distressing memories into language. They believe that in this way women begin to transform their traumatic experiences into more manageable narratives. The next step is to write their stories. The writing and re-writing process allows women to find images and metaphors to represent their individual stories. As witnessed to in VIN,

> To write those same stories as narrative is a second and huge step because we put form around what has seemed so chaotic, we make public to strangers the most intimate truths about ourselves ... When we write a poem or letter or story about the impact or centre of that narrative, we take a third leaping step – we dare to make art out of female experience – to fly in the face of all expectations for what is acceptable in such forms (McNaron and Morgan, 1982:19 in Tal, 1996: 173).

This third step, 'the leap' into some kind of artistic expression, the better to be able to cross the threshold dividing *inside* from *outside* or to disrupt accepted frameworks of thought and understanding, will be the focus of the next section.

Narrative or Cries and Whispers?

A key question that has been raised in the preceding exploration of post-Holocaust

and post-incest/sexual abuse witness literature has been whether any kind of coherent, plausible narrative is possible following such trauma. Relevant to this is the question as to what effect violent trauma, pain and terror inflicted by others has on language and the 'voice' of victims.

Severe domestic abuse has been likened to torture, and can produce the same effects in a victim as a sustained period of torture.[26] In her classic study, *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of The World*, Elaine Scarry explains that torture inflicts bodily pain that is itself language-destroying. She says 'Physical pain does not simply resist language but actively destroys it, bringing about an immediate reversion to a state anterior to language, to the sounds and cries a human being makes before language is learned' (Scarry, 1985:4).

Scarry identifies a number of ways in which a voice might be given to those in pain, where such pain has destroyed language. One of these is the work of Amnesty International on behalf of victims of torture, and in some ways their work parallels the efforts of those seeking to give female victims of male violence a voice.[27]

Scarry notes that Amnesty International's ability to bring about the cessation of torture depends centrally on its publicity and whether it is able to communicate effectively the reality of physical pain to those who are not themselves experiencing that pain. She claims that

> ... embedded in Amnesty's work ... is the assumption that the act of verbally expressing pain is a necessary prelude to the collective task of diminishing

[26] See Francine Pickup. *Ending Violence Against Women: A Challenge for Development and Humanitarian Work, Oxfam* 2001:49. See also discussion of PTSD (post traumatic stress disorder) in the National Research Council's Report *Understanding Violence Against Women*, 1996:82-94. See also Hart, 1986:19 in Tifft, 1993:18.

[27] Since 2004 Amnesty International have run a campaign against Violence Against Women, regarding it as a human rights issue. See HYPERLINK http://web.amnesty.org/actforwomen/index-eng

> pain. It is also true that here ... the human voice must aspire to become a precise reflection of material reality (Scarry, 1985:9).

There are problems with attaining such a precise reflection of the body in pain in language. Pain resists verbal expression, and what cannot be verbally represented also struggles to be politically represented. Again as Scarry asserts

> ... the sentient fact of physical pain is ... so nearly impossible to express, so flatly invisible, that the problem goes beyond the possibility that almost any other phenomenon occupying the same environment will distract attention from it. Indeed, even where it is virtually the only content in a given environment, it will be possible to describe that environment as though the pain were not there (Scarry, 1985:12).

An example of this process is when 'torture' is described as '*information* gathering' or '*intelligence* gathering' (see Scarry, 1985:12).

As Scarry makes clear

> If the felt-attributes of pain are (through one means of verbal objectification or another) lifted into the visible world, *and if the referent for these now objectified attributes is understood to be the human body,* then the sentient fact of that person's suffering will become knowable to a second person. It is also possible, however for the felt attributes of pain to be lifted into the visible world but now attached to *a referent other than the human body.* That is, the felt-characteristics of pain - one of which is its compelling vibrancy, or its incontestable reality or simply its "certainty" - can be appropriated away from the body and presented as the attributes of something else (something which by itself lacks those attributes, something which does not itself appear vibrant real or certain) (Scarry, 1985:13-14).

She goes on to highlight the fact that the difficulty inherent in articulating physical pain can lead to serious political and perceptual complications. She says that

> the failure to express pain, to objectify its attributes or once those attributes are objectified, to refer them to their original site in the human body, will always work to allow it to be appropriated by and conflated with debased forms of power. On the other hand, the successful expression of pain will always work to expose and make less possible that appropriation (Scarry, 1985:14).

'What is quite literally at stake in the body in pain', according to Scarry, 'is the making and unmaking of the world' (Scarry, 1985:23).

If pain, trauma and abuse make it very hard for coherent witness to that experience to surface effectively, as Scarry is suggesting, might there be factors that mitigate that difficulty and assist in the telling of the stories of the victims and survivors of violence?

In, 'Bearing Witness or the Vicissitudes of Listening', Laub speaks of the film *The Eighty-first Blow,* where Chaim Guri portrays the image of a man who recounts the story of his sufferings in the camps, to which his audience respond "All this cannot be true, it could not have happened. You must have made it up." In Jewish tradition a man can survive only eighty blows, so such a denial by the listeners inflicts, according to the film, the ultimately fatal blow to this man (see Laub, 1992a:68). Laub asserts that if there is not an addressable other who can be told of the pain of the past, and recognise it and affirm it as real, then the victim's story is lost to the world and to the victim. Laub claims that 'it is ... this ultimate annihilation of a narrative that *cannot be heard* and of a story that *cannot be witnessed,* which constitutes the mortal eighty-first blow' (Laub, 1992a: 68).

The problem, according to Laub, is that the subject of trauma lives in its grip and constantly undergoes its ceaseless repetitions and re-enactments. He says that

> The traumatic event, although real, took place outside the parameters of "normal reality", such as causality, sequence, place and time. The trauma is thus an event that has no beginning, no ending, no before, no during and no after. This absence of categories that define it lends it a quality of "otherness", a salience, a timelessness and a ubiquity that puts it outside the range of associatively linked experiences, outside the range of comprehension, of recounting and of mastery (Laub, 1992a:69).

The survivor thus remains trapped in both the experience itself, of which he or she can form no coherent narrative, and in its constant replaying.

Laub also contends that to undo such entrapment, a process of constructing a narrative, of reconstructing a history and thus of re-externalizing the event needs to be set in motion. This re-externalization of the event can occur and take effect only if the story can be articulated and *transferred* to another outside the self and then taken back again. Telling requires a reassertion of reality and a process that, as it were, decontaminates the victim from the 'evil' that has been enacted on her or him (see Laub, 1992a:69). Testimony addressed to a listening other, can free a victim from the cycle of internal repetition of the trauma, and from being defined, to themselves and others, solely by their victimisation (see Laub, 1992a:70).

I noted earlier the importance of a community of listeners for the emergence of witnesses to incest and sexual abuse. One of the difficulties in breaking the silence and the taboos that surround the issue of violence against women is this problem of bridging the gap between those who have first-hand experience of this kind of trauma and those who do not, and of how society comes really to *know* the nature and extent of the problem. It can also be hard to be an attentive listener to testimony to abuse and

trauma, especially if the listener finds themselves socially positioned as belonging to the oppressive group, for example being a man who does not abuse women.[28]

Even having found an appropriate audience, however there are those who would see a narrative reconstruction of such trauma as either impossible or insufficient to help to 'free' the victims from its affects. Saul Friedlander asks, does 'an event like the "Final Solution" allow[s] for *any kind* of narrative or does it foreclose certain narrative modalities? Does it perhaps escape the grasp of plausible narrative altogether?' (Friedlander, 1991:18 in Gubar 2003:7-8) Given the difficulties in constructing plausible narratives post-trauma, there is also the question of the desirability of attempting to do so.

In ' Speaking in Signs: Narrative Trauma in Pastoral Theology', Heather Walton turns to the work of Antze and Lambek who argue that 'there is nothing redemptive about subsuming the symbolic/embodied symptoms of trauma into a coherent narrative script' (Antze and Lambek, 1996:xix in Walton, 2002:4). It has been suggested that such individual narratives of pain and trauma may often be expected to be framed in conventional forms by medical/psychological or social authorities in an attempt not only to heal but also to control those who have experienced such trauma (see Antze and Lambek, 1996:xxiv). It may be that, as Walton suggests, 'What are circulated as trauma narratives are often attempts by those who have *not* been subject to such overwhelming circumstances to repair the social fabric by restoring comprehensibility and communication'(Walton, 2002:4).

Again, as Walton has stressed, examining particularly narrative in the Christian tradition, 'Story telling is not always a benign and liberating activity ...the Christian desire to achieve narratives of wholeness and healing can be a violent process that not only denies the tragedy in human life but also prevents us from encountering God in

[28] In my discussion of the work of Coetzee, I engage with the concept of those positioned as colonisers because of their genealogy but who would yet refuse that designation.

the midst of extreme circumstances' (Graham, Walton and Ward 2005:70) She would claim that there is a need to move to an 'appreciation of the power of poesis to embody trauma and enable a dark epiphany of the divine' (Graham, Walton, and Ward, 2005:71).

Walton looks to the work of Hélèn Cixous for whom it is necessary to 'put the metaphor in the place of suffering' and sees a need 'to transubstantiate the experience [of pain] through poesis' (Graham, Walton and Ward, 2005:72). We can also return to Gubar on this point who, in relation to poetry being written after Auschwitz, says that

> ... poetry serves an important function here, for it abrogates narrative coherence and thereby marks discontinuity. ... it facilitates modes of discourse that denote the psychological and political, ethical and aesthetic consequences of the calamity without laying claim to experiencing or comprehending it in its totality. In an effort to signal the impossibility of a sensible story, the poet provides spurts of vision, moments of truth, baffling but nevertheless powerful pictures of scenes unassimilated into an explanatory plot and thus seizes the past "as an image which flashes up at the instant when it can be recognised and is never seen again" (Gubar, 2003:7).

Gubar employs this motif from the work of Walter Benjamin, suggesting that it is *images* (rather than stories which tend to recount the past so as to account for it) that put the "then" of the past into dialectical relationship with the "now" of the present,[29] constituting 'a critique of the myth of progress' and promoting 'mindfulness about how the past continues to exist as an outrage in the present' (Gubar, 2003:7). She goes on to assert that 'Verse can violate narrative logic as completely as does trauma itself' (Gubar, 2003:8), and that unlike the linear nature of narrative it would seem that poetry can

[29] This could be seen as a form of border crossing or bridging or straddling, where the border or boundary is such as we have noted divided the inside of the camps of the Holocaust from the outside, and the experiences of that inside from the experiences of outside.

> present *images* that testify to the truth of an event as well as to its incomprehensibility – or its limited comprehensibility as a piece of a larger phenomenon that itself still defies understanding (Gubar, 2003:8).

In this I am not looking to something that offers plausible explanation or closure or any kind of reparation as such, but noting Benjamin's words 'the fracturing of a present understood to be shot through with haunting chips of the "wreckage upon wreckage" that still is the past.' (Gubar, 2003:8) Thus, according to Gubar,

> ..there is an urgency to continue to confront the past as it passes out of personal recollection. The "warrant for imagination" consists in a psychological, ethical, and historical need to remember what one never knew (Gubar, 2003:9).

She finds this accomplished to a degree in poetry as a genre, even that written by those who did not directly live through the events of the Holocaust.

At this point a certain cynicism, or one might even say realism may surface and we might want to agree with W.H. Auden that 'poetry makes nothing happen' (Auden 1979:80 in Gubar, 2003:9), or again with Seamus Heaney that the 'efficacy of poetry is nil – no lyric has ever stopped a tank' (Heaney, 1988:107 in Gubar 2003:9). However Heaney does also offer an apology for the importance of poetry in respect of the otherwise 'unsayable', in that he says that poetry manages to hold 'attention for a space, functions not as a distraction but as pure concentration, a focus where our power to concentrate is concentrated back on ourselves' (Heaney, 1988:108 in Gubar, 2003:10).

Many will be familiar with Theodor Adorno's famous dictum, 'After Auschwitz, it is no longer possible to write poems' (see Felman, 1992a:33) However it is perhaps less

well known that this is not a final word from Adorno on the subject, which he himself returns to, emphasizing, as Felman interprets his thought, that

> it is only art that can henceforth be equal to its own historical impossibility, that art alone can live up to the task of contemporary thinking and of meeting the incredible demands of suffering, of politics and of contemporary consciousness, and yet escape the subtly omnipresent and the almost unavoidable cultural betrayal both of history and of the victims (Felman, 1992a:34).

Adorno expresses this revision of his thinking by claiming that it remains true

> ... *literature must resist this verdict* ... It is now virtually in art alone that suffering can still find its own voice, consolation, without immediately being betrayed by it... Yet paradoxically... it is to works of art that has fallen the burden of wordlessly asserting what is barred to politics (Adorno, 1962 in Arato and Gebhart 1982:313 in Felman, 1992a:34).

In her study of poetry written after Auschwitz, Gubar sees what she calls the poets of the Holocaust as largely succeeding in this task.

> In their moving and, oddly, their most warily tentative works, poets of the Holocaust counter Adorno's original judgement by striving to articulate the imprimatur of the incongruous, even at times the unseemly moral imperative of enunciating not one's own but someone else's suffering. And they do so by making the reader fully aware of their own suspicions about the aestheticizing in which they engage. Thus what sustains their voices, is the allusive (even the blatantly illusive) authority of experiences not their own. Without alleviating either grief or guilt, poets of the Holocaust can teach us how to inhabit, at least

> momentarily, events in history that we can neither escape nor transcend (Gubar, 2003:63-64).

Before looking in some detail at the working of this process and the way such a poetics of testimony might need to challenge linguistic and literary forms in the struggle to articulate the unsayable, as demonstrated in the writing of one of the most compelling poets of the Holocaust, Paul Celan, I note the lack, as far as I am aware, of much poetic activity (though there is some) to enunciate the suffering of women victims and survivors of violence and abuse, and the fact that such work as there is has not gripped public imagination in such a way as has post-Holocaust literature.

Paul Celan – saying the unsayable

> *The breakage of the verse enacts the breakage of the world.* (Felman, 1992a:25).

The poet Paul Celan (who was originally named Paul Ancel – he renamed himself anagrammatically after the war), was born to German speaking Jewish parents in 1920 in Czernowitz in a northern province of Romania. In July 1941, S.S. and Romanian troops, began destroying the Czernowitz Jewish community. The following year Celan's parents were deported to a hard labour camp in Eastern Ukraine where his father died of disease and his mother was shot. Celan escaped that round-up, but was later sent to a labour camp for eighteen months of harsh physical labour. In 1944 he returned to Czernowitz, which had been liberated by Soviet troops. By 1945 Celan was translating European literature including a number of short stories by Kafka, an author who was to remain of central importance to him for the rest of his life.[30] After the war he moved to Bucharest and then Vienna before settling in Paris in 1948,[31] where he continued to write poetry (between 1938 and 1970 he wrote some eight

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[30] Kafka's writing has also been of importance to Coetzee whose fiction I use as a case study later in this thesis.

[31] Celan's writing was influenced by the fact that he (like Kristeva and Levinas whose works I also engage with) lived in exile from his native land.

hundred poems in German), and to work as a translator. In April 1970, at the age of forty-nine, Celan drowned himself in the Seine.

Given his background, and the impact of the Nazi regime on his life, after the war it was necessary for Celan to decide which language to write his poetry in. Although it might be thought that it would be difficult for him to write in the language of his oppressors, and despite his proficiency in several other languages, he did in fact continue to write his verse in German. He regarded German as his mother-tongue, and he told his biographer, Israel Chalfen 'Only in one's mother tongue can one express one's own truth. In a foreign language the poet lies'(Chalfen, 1979 in Felman, 1992a:26). This loyalty left him bound however to a mother-tongue that was the language of the murderers of his mother, in his own phrase '*Mutter – und Mördersprache.*' He experienced then as Felman says 'a subjugation to the very language from which death, humiliation, torture and destruction issued' (Felman, 1992a:27).

Celan's poetic writing therefore struggles, as Felman has noted, with the German language, to 'annihilate his own annihilation in it, to reappropriate the language which has marked his own exclusion; the poems dislocate the language so as to remould it, to radically shift its semantic and grammatical assumptions and remake – creatively and critically- a new poetic language entirely Celan's own'[32] (Felman, 1992a:27). He has to 'reclaim and repossess the very language in which *testimony* must and cannot simply and uncritically be given' (Felman, 1992a:27-28). In his efforts to reclaim and reappropriate German from its immediate past, Celan spoke of himself as someone 'who goes with his very being to language, stricken by and seeking reality'.

[32] 'Celan's German is an eerie, nearly ghostly language; it is both mother-tongue and thus firmly anchored in the realm of the dead, and a language the poet has to make up, to recreate, to reinvent, to bring back to life... Radically dispossessed of any other reality he set about to create his own language – a language as absolutely exiled as he himself' (Joris, 1995:42-43 in Coetzee, 2007:130-131).

This passionate statement was made in a speech he gave at a prize award ceremony in 1958 in Bremen

> Within reach and not lost, there remained in the midst of the losses, this one thing: language.
>
> This, the language, was not lost, but remained, yes, in spite of everything. But it had to pass through its own answerlessness, pass through a frightful falling mute, pass through the thousand darknesses of death-bringing speech. It passed through and yielded no words for what was happening - but it went through those happenings. Went through and could come into the light of day again "enriched" by all that.
>
> In this language I have sought, then and in the years since then, to write poems –so as to speak, to orient myself, to explore where I was and was meant to go, to sketch out reality for myself.
>
> ...These are the efforts of someone coursed over by the stars of human handiwork, someone also shelterless in a sense undreamt of till now and thus most uncannily out in the open, who goes with his very being to language, stricken by and seeking reality (Bremen Speech in Felman, 1992a:28).

'Death Fugue'

Thus, stricken by reality, and seeking reality, Celan publishes his first poem, 'Death Fugue' (Todesfuge), written toward the end of 1944, and much celebrated since. In it Celan seeks to express a reality that evades clear expression in narrative, in order to witness to an unspeakable past. The poem is a response to reports of small Jewish orchestras being called upon to play tangos within concentration camps, often to accompany grave-digging and executions. As is apparent from the first stanza below, the poem takes up the rhythm of a tango.

Black milk of morning we drink you at dusktime
we drink you at noontime and dawntime we drink you at night
we drink and drink
we scoop out a grave in the sky where it's roomy to lie
There's a man in this house who cultivates snakes and who writes
who writes when it's nightfall 'nach Deutschland' your golden hair
Margarete
he writes it and walks from the house and all the stars start flashing
he whistles his dogs to draw near
he whistles his Jews to appear starts us scooping a grave out of sand
he command us play up for the dance [33]

Here we find extremely powerful, evocative images of the death camps: milk blackened by ashes, the ashen hair of Shulamite, who is the personification of Jewish womanhood, contrasted with the golden-haired Aryan/German ideal, Margarete. Celan speaks of graves in the sand, graves in the sky, a gang-boss from Germany, leaden bullets, packs of dogs being whistled up, all set so incongruously to the rhythm of the dance.

In her account of the poem, Felman focuses on the motif of drinking, which she sees as traditionally a poetic metaphor for yearning, as romantic thirst and desire, but here there is only the black milk 'at once dark blood and burnt ashes', to answer 'one's thirst, one's longing, one's desire'(Felman 1992a:30). She claims that the entire poem is in fact about the relation between violence and language. She identifies in the poem the cruelty that masquerades as art [music] and draws attention to the fact that

> the poem works specifically and contrapuntally to dislocate this masquerade of cruelty as art, and to exhibit the obscenity of this aesthetization, by opposing the melodious ecstasy of the aesthetic pleasure to the dissonance of the

[33] Translated by Jerome Rothenberg in Joris, 2005:46-47.

> commandant's speech acts and to the violence of his verbal abuse (Felman, 1992a:31).

The writer and critic J.M.Coetzee, exploration of whose fiction forms the second half of this study, has written a critical essay on Celan's poetry, in which he describes 'Death Fugue' as one of the landmark poems of the twentieth century. He describes it as 'the most direct of Celan's poems in naming and blaming: naming what went on in the death camps, blaming Germany' (Coetzee, 2007:119). However, the subsequent history of this poem shows that even the disrupting, disturbing, nature of such a work of witness can be appropriated, sidelined or diminished. Coetzee claims that Celan thought he was being wilfully misinterpreted by German critics. He quotes one as saying, that Celan had '[escaped] history's bloody chamber of horrors to rise into the ether of pure poetry' (Holthusen in Felstiner, 1995:79, in Coetzee, 2007:119). This is so far from what Celan intended and it was ironic in the extreme, that he should be accused of escaping into a rarefied aesthetic zone when it was the obscenity of using art to mask or conceal such horrors as those of the Holocaust that he was seeking to witness to. He insisted that he practised an art of the real, an art that 'does not transfigure or render "poetical"; it names, it posits, it tries to measure the area of the given and the possible' (Celan *trans.* Waldrop, 1986:16 in Coetzee, 2007:120).

The reception of the poem continued to be distressing for Celan. It was subsequently widely anthologised and studied in schools, as part of a programme of *Vergangheitsbewältigung,* that is, coming to terms with or overcoming the past, but it seems that while teachers were happy to use the poem to illustrate use of musical rhythm in poetry, they did not want to engage with the content, to be side-tracked by talk of the Holocaust in class. Celan's distress at this led him to refuse to perform readings of the poem again, or to allow it to be further anthologized.

Pierre Joris has claimed of 'Death Fugue' that

> ... its poetics are still rather traditional: the relationship between word and world, between signifier and signified, is not put into question. It is a poem that still, somehow, maybe desperately, believes or wants to believe or acts as if it did believe, in the fullness of utterance, in the possibility of representation (Joris, 2005:25).

Celan's poetic style was to develop from that exhibited in 'Death Fugue'. Again, as Joris has asserted, compared with nearly all of Celan's subsequent poetry, in Death Fugue it is clear who speaks and the position they speak from. The poem is 'spoken' by a survivor on adopting the persona '*wir*' (we) of the murdered Jews. It is this assumption, 'That the dead can speak, or that a survivor can speak for them, that there can be witnessing to their death' (Joris, 2005:26), at least in such a direct fashion, that Celan radically calls into question in his later work.

In his later poetry then, Celan 'rejects, within the language, not its music and its singing - which continue to define the essence of poetic language for Celan - but a certain predetermined kind of recognizably *melodious* musicality' (Felman, 1992a:35). As he said himself

> ... the verse distrusts the beautiful ... insists on having its 'musicality' placed in a region where it no longer has anything in common with that 'melodious sound' which more or less undisturbed sounded side by side with the greatest horror. The concern of this language is, in all the unalterable multivalence of the expression, *precision*. It doesn't transfigure, doesn't 'poeticize, it names and places (Celan 'Reply to an Inquiry Held by the Librairie Flinker, Paris', (The Paper Castle) in Felman, 1992a:35 emphasis added by Felman).

Writing about Celan and his work, Joris suggests that Celan was not just concerned to offer credible witness to the reality of the past, but that he was also able to retain a hopeful purpose for the future. Joris claims that for Celan as a survivor, the poetry that

is written after Auschwitz, as it must be, must always remember the horror of the Shoah, but that this past, although it is as an abyss, is also the ground on which the work rests and that it is possible to be resolutely forward looking and hopeful from this foundation (see Joris, 2005:5-6). Of course Celan witnesses to the past but Joris sees that the mode of Celan's witnessing differs markedly from that of other Holocaust writers, and that difference itself is what makes possible such a visionary stance. Despite the haunting presence throughout his work of the events of the Nazi era, particularly the murder of his mother, there is a determined refusal in Celan to let his writing become simply a form of narrative of the Shoah. In strong contrast with some other Holocaust writers, such as Wiesel and Levi who wanted to offer accurate accounts, Celan refused to speak in public or private directly of his life as connected with the Shoah. He has said "I don't need to relate what the life of a Jew was like in the war years" (see Joris, 2005:7).

The tension surrounding his relationship with 'Death Fugue', as Joris sees it, is

> ... emblematic of the tension in Celan with regard to two essential poles: on the one hand, the need to witness, and on the other the desire ... to create in and through the poems a new, viable world that would overcome the past - without abolishing or dismissing it (Joris, 2005:25).

This latter desire came to the fore in his later work, beginning with his poem, 'Breathturn' which was essentially concerned with 'the very possibility of creating such a new world in and through poetry' (Joris, 2005:25).

To achieve this end Celan's use of language and poetic form had to change. As Bart Philipsen claims that there has developed in the wake of Auschwitz 'a new vocabulary and syntax'... to attempt to express the nothingness and/or absence at the heart of presence by focussing on the sublime inadequacy of (verbal) representations' (Philipsen, 2004:102), He maintains that the poetry of Celan represents one of the

most profound examples of this. Philipsen says that his poems 'radically and systematically resist any attempt by the reader to reduce them to a thematic account of the Holocaust. Celan's work starts from fundamental experience of modernity that one 'doesn't know [anymore] what counts' (Philipsen, 2004:103).

Up until 1963 Celan's poetry is comparatively accessible. His later poetry however has been called 'strikingly difficult, even obscure' (Coetzee, 2007:116). Coetzee claims that '... reviewers called the later Celan 'hermetic'' (Coetzee, 2007:116). Hans-Georg Gadamer, defending Celan against charges of obscurity, said understanding could be found not by filling in background to the poem but by being attentive to 'what the poem [itself] knows (Coetzee, 2007:117). Coetzee, extrapolating from the views of Felstiner, a major translator and commentator on Celan's works comments on the issue of the supposed hermeticism of Celan's work thus:

> Even if Celan's poems were totally incomprehensible, they would nevertheless stand in our way like a tomb, a tomb built by a 'Poet, Survivor, Jew' ... insisting by its looming presence that we remember, even though the words inscribed on it may seem to belong to an undecipherable tongue (Coetzee, 2004:118).

Nicholas Meyerhofer concurs with this assessment of Celan's deployment of language in his poetry and the difficulties its poetic polyvalence and idiosyncratic use pose for the reader. He cites Dietland Meinecke as describing the typical Celan poem as 'a said on the border of the unsayable' (Meinecke 1970:18 in Meyerhofer, 1981:73). Yet despite the accusations of hermeticism levelled against him, it is known that Celan was very concerned about his poetry being understood, albeit not in a facile fashion. The difficulty here as Meyerhofer sees it, is that Celan's poems are

> grounded in a linguistic intentionality which proposed a poetic language set free of traditional significans/significatum relationships. In Celan, words are

> not simply used as designators of things: they often appear as autonomously self-asserting entities (Meyerhofer, 1981:73).

Thus, Celan's later poetry has been regarded as obscure by some readers and critics. His unique deployment of language does not uncover one meaning but shatters into a polyvalence, which opens up new visions. Derrida has described his poetry as uncovering

> ...a secret, [that the] poem only unveils to confirm that there is something secret there, withdrawn, forever beyond the reach of hermeneutic exhaustion. A nonhermeneutic secret, it remains ... heterogeneous to all interpretive totalization eradicating the hermeneutic principle. There is no meaning, ... no longer a sole originary meaning (Derrida, 1986:28 in Hawkins, 2002:53 n. 23).

The 'Meridian' Speech: The poem as a bridge to the Other

One occasion when Celan spoke memorably of his understanding of the power of poetry was in a speech he gave in 1960 on the occasion of receiving the prestigious Georg Büchner Prize (from the German Academy for Language and Literature). This speech has come to be known simply as "The Meridian". In it he characterised and attempted to convey his personal hopes for contemporary poetry. He also attempted a description of the poetic experience itself. Among other things, he outlined the need as he saw it for poetry to enact a move towards the 'other'. The section of this intriguing speech that is of most interest to me, consists of his thoughts on poetry's part in bridging the abyss between the self and the other. For Celan this is the work of the poem and what is signalled in this is 'a step beyond the void and beyond silence to the possibility of a radically new kind of meeting' with the other (Meyerhofer, 1981:77). As Meyerhofer expresses it 'To effect the creation or liberation of otherness must surely mean that the unreality of language, i.e. the dilemma of the reality/language dualism is, however momentarily, overcome' (Meyerhofer, 1981:79).

In "The Meridian" Celan asks

> Can we now, perhaps, find the place where strangeness was present, the place where a person succeeded in setting himself free, as an – estranged - I? Can we find such a place, such a step? (Celan, 1978:34).

He goes on,

> But I think - and this thought can scarcely come as a surprise to you - I think that it has always belonged to the expectations of the poem, in precisely this manner to speak in the cause of the strange – no I can no longer use this word – in precisely this manner to speak *in the cause of an Other* – who knows, perhaps in the cause of a *wholly Other* (Celan, 1978:35-36).

Celan speaks of the poem participating in the ethical relationship of self to other. In what he says of the poem reaching for the other there are echoes of Laub's assertion of the need for an 'addressable' other

> The poem is alone. It is alone and underway. Whoever writes it must remain in its company.
> But doesn't the poem, for precisely that reason, at this point participate in an encounter – *in the mystery of an encounter?*
>
> The poem wants to reach the Other, it needs this Other, it needs a vis a vis. It searches it out and addresses it.
> Each thing, each person, is a form of the Other for the poem, as it makes for this Other (Celan, 1978:37).

Later in the speech Celan speaks of the dialogical nature of the poem and the way in which it addresses and invokes the other.[34]

> The poem becomes – and under what conditions! a poem of one who – as before - perceives, who faces that which appears. Who questions this appearing and addresses it. It becomes a dialogue – it is often despairing dialogue.
>
> Only in the realm of this dialogue [poem] does that which is addressed take form and gather round the I who is addressing and naming it. But the one who has been addressed and who, by virtue of having been named, has, as it were, become a thou, also brings its otherness along into the present, into this present. - In the here and now of the poem it is still possible the poem itself, after all, has this one, unique, limited present – only in this immediacy and proximity does it allow the most idiosyncratic quality of the Other, its time, to participate in the dialogue (Celan, 1978:37).

Celan's themes of searching out and addressing the other, of the poem as being that encounter that enables the crossing of the void, the abyss between self and other are ones that will also be explored in my engagement with the work of Levinas in a subsequent chapter.

Celan concludes his Meridian speech thus [35]

> I find something which binds and which, like the poem, leads to an encounter. I find something, like language, abstract, yet earthy, terrestrial, something circular, which traverses both poles and returns to itself, thereby - I am happy

[34] His language resonates with that of Levinas who distinguishes the invocatory strand of language, the Saying in the Said, which I will examine in greater detail in Chapter 4.
[35] From this point on the translation is taken from Rosemarie Waldrop's translation in Joris 2005:154-169.

> to report - even crossing the tropics and tropes. I find... a *meridian* (Celan 1960 *trans*. R. Waldrop, in Joris, 2005:169).

Celan and Silence [36]

One of the themes that will be explored in this thesis is the disruptive power of silence, the power of silence to speak. Celan also spoke in "The Meridian" of 'the poem' inclining towards silence. He says:

> It is true, the poem today, shows – and this has only indirectly to do with difficulties of vocabulary, the faster flow of syntax or a more awakened sense of ellipsis, none of which we should underrate – the poem clearly shows a strong tendency towards silence (Celan, 1960 *trans* R. Wardrop, in Joris, 2005:163).

All poets obviously work with silence as well as words and Celan deployed silence in a profound manner.

> By introducing silence as a rhythmic breakdown and as a displacing counterpoint to sound not just in between his stanzas and his verses but even in the very midst of the phonetic flow and the poetic diction of his words (...), Celan strives to defetishize his language and to dislocate his own aesthetic mastery (Felman, 1992a:37).

Denis Schmit expresses a similar understanding in his essay 'Black Milk and Blue' where he reflects on silence in Celan's poetry. He asks

[36] Part of my discussion Coetzee's fiction, which forms the second half of his thesis, will include a discussion of the power of silence

> How does one read silence? Preliminary, one notes that the word in the poem stands out against a certain haunting silence articulating the contours of the poem, yet the real enigma of language in the poem is that in it the word not only stands out against the silent space around it but also bears the traces of silence within itself. Even in its apartness and singularity, the word is not solid without fissures. Even as apart, perhaps then more than ever, the word stands as an appeal, the availability for what stands apart from its own apartness, language in the poem preserves the essential capacity of all language to throw itself into the darkness and fall mute (Schmidt, 1994:112 in Hawkins, 2002:39).

Schweigen (silence, to be silent) as both noun and verb is employed in Celan's poetry. The fractured nature, particularly of his later writing as demonstrated below, and his use of allusion rather than description, highlight the silence between the words.

Hawkins refers to Celan's language as 'a language that refuses the violation of penetrating clarity, … a language that favors darkness over light, uncertainty over certainty (which never the less is the language of truth, by means of a central questioning stance)'(Hawkins, 2002:42). As is apparent from one of his later poems, Celan's became a task of exploring the limits of language, the place where language broke down into sound in order to give voice to the unspeakable past and build a bridge to the other, to address the other, to build a new world.

> NO SANDART ANY MORE, no sandbook, no masters
> Nothing in the dice. How
> many mutes?
> Seventeen
>
> Your question – your answer.

Your chant, what does it know?

Deepinsnow,

Eepinno,

I-i-o

(Celan in Joris, 2005:100)

In the next part of this thesis I engage with the work of two theorist/philosophers, both in their own way, exiles 'unhomed' others as Celan was; Julia Kristeva and Emmanuel Levinas. Building on Ricoeur's understanding of the function of metaphor I will explore their thinking on the way in which language, particularly poetic language or literature, might disrupt existing discourses and call into question our ways of being, one with another.

Chapter 3

Julia Kristeva

> *On close inspection, all literature is probably a version of the apocalypse that seems to me rooted, no matter what its socio-historical conditions might be, on the fragile border (borderline cases) where identities (subject/object, etc.) do not exist or only barely so – double, fuzzy, heterogeneous, animal, metamorphosed, altered, abject* (Kristeva, 1982:207).

A theorist whose work has at its heart concerns with the issue of identity, the creation of the subject and the power of literature (and in particular, certain literature) to disrupt shared understandings in the social world, is Julia Kristeva. Her writing has been said to be full of contradictions, and because it is, it is said to challenge 'the law of noncontradiction upon which traditional notions of identity are built' (Oliver, 1993a:1), and in doing so 'to challenge traditional notions of identity' themselves (Oliver, 1993a:1). Since one of my contentions in this thesis is that traditional forms and expectations of gender identity in society still contribute to there being violence enacted by men on women, then challenging traditional notions of identity may form part of a preventative strategy with regard to this issue. My main interest in the work of Kristeva therefore lies in her theorising on the power of literature to enact 'revolution' at the level of the social imaginary. As well as charting the disruptive potential of literature, Kristeva is concerned with the creation of the subject, what she calls the *subject-in-process*, and the way in which this process involves a potential 'violent' separation from the maternal body. Since one of my underlying concerns is to understand the origins of violence against women, I am also interested in this aspect of Kristeva's theory and what it might imply for women in particular.

Background and influences

Sometimes known as a 'French feminist', Kristeva inhabits the two aspects of that

term in her own unique way. Her work has been open to a wide range of interpretation and reception, particularly around the question of her feminist allegiances (see Oliver, 1993a:1-2).[37] Also, Kristeva is not French by birth. She grew up in communist Eastern Europe, in Bulgaria, and migrated to France in the mid 1960s. This was at a point of radical upheaval in political and intellectual spheres in France. The intellectual climate, and the alliances that she formed at this time, fed and stimulated her creative thinking. Being resident in France means that she has spent most of her life as an outsider, a position which has given her specific 'situated knowledge' with regard to estrangement and exile, themes that reoccur in her writing.

In Bulgaria, Kristeva grew up under a totalitarian regime but, with her parents' encouragement, she found within that context that arts and even religion offered 'small spaces of freedom' (Kristeva, 1996d:49, in Walton, 2007a:97). Initially she studied the work of Russian Formalist, Mikhail Bakhtin. He theorized a model of culture as a complex conversation. His was a dialogical understanding of the social order and he saw language and subjectivity as constituted through conversational relations with others. For Bakhtin, it is solely through such dialogical processes that identity and agency are also achieved (see Walton, 2007a:97). With regard to literature, he has argued that particularly the novel form, allows a whole series of different factors and/or ideological positions to interface with each other in such a way that no single or final authorial or authoritative view necessarily emerges (see Jasper, 2007:2). For Bakhtin, novels undercut and resist any single way of reading or understanding the text. Alongside literature, he identified religion as a privileged site where there could be both the construction and Walton calls a 'carnivalesque contestation by the common people' (Walton, 2007a:97) of orders of social regulation.

[37] 'Some critics argue that her theories are useful for feminism (Chanter, Rose, Ziarek); others argue that they are not (Butler, Fraser, Leland, Groz, Jones, Stone, Kuykendall)' (Oliver, 1993a: 1-2).

Kristeva was attracted to Bakhtin's thinking on literature, which pointed to heterogeneous forces interacting and dialoguing in the novel (see Jasper, 2007:2-3). She embraces this in her development of the idea of *intertextuality* as a theory of interpretation.[38] In Bakhtin's work she came to see how 'the novel could encode forms of resistance to the formal, ideological structures typically brought to texts by writers and readers alike' (Jasper, 2007:3).

Kristeva's original academic interest lay in structural linguistics, and Alison Jasper has speculated that this led her to ask how language might be 'related to a world beyond its own symbolic structures' (Jasper, 2007:3). For her there was also a question about the nature of truth; about what distinctions might be drawn between what might be subjectively determined through symbolic representation in human language and culture, and whether this had any grounding in an objective reality (see Jasper, 2007:3). She conjectured (following Bakhtin), that 'texts, especially novels but also certain forms of surrealist poetry, would allow for the interplay of and dialogue between heterogeneous elements which could subvert or unsettle closed ideological systems' (Jasper, 2007:3). This prevents closed ideological systems laying claim to objectivity. As I have indicated the second half of this thesis will involve an engagement with the novels of a contemporary writer and I will be examining the way in which they might 'perform' resistance to and disruption of, such current dominant ideological systems.

Kristeva and Lacan

In order to better convey Kristeva's understanding of the revolutionary potential of

[38]'[Kristeva] 'credits Bakhtin ...with being the first literary theorist to contend with the idea that "any text is the absorption and transformation of another" ("Word, Dialogue and Novel, in *The Kristeva Reader* p 37). In *Revolution in Poetic Language* ... she reintroduces intertextuality under the name "transposition" to stress the "passage from one sign system to another" that takes place as one text creates itself out of the thematic and generic materials of another text (*Revolution in Poetic Language*, p. 59) ... her "understanding of intertextuality [...] points to a dynamics involving a destruction of the creative identity and the reconstruction of a new plurality' (*Julia Kristeva Interviews* p190 in Becker-Leckrone, 2005:156).

poetic language, I will first outline some of her thinking on the emergence of language and the formation of the subject, which developed in dialogue with the work of Jacques Lacan.

Kristeva's arrived in France at the point of publication of Lacan's *Écrits* (1973 [1966]), and it was the thinking of Lacan (a disciple, if eventually something of a dissident one, of Freud), that was to provide a significant resource for her in making connections between the three key areas of theory in which her interest lay; the body, subjectivity and language.

Lacan himself set out a threefold order of being, the *real*, the *imaginary* and the *symbolic*. It is possible to read these three orders as chronological or developmental stages in the person's road to subjectivity, though, as will become apparent, they are not intended to be seen solely as developmental stages. For him, in the beginning, the infant enjoys an idyllic, undifferentiated unity with the mother's body. This for Lacan was the *real* but we should note that for Lacan, as understood by Kristeva, 'the *real* is a hole, a void…' (Kristeva, 1996b:23, in Walton, 2007a:101).

For Lacan, it is the 'mirror stage' that enacts entry into the *imaginary*. In this the child, up till now existing in the idyll of the *real,* confronts an image (this may be an actual mirror image or a more 'social' reflection of him/herself in the eyes of another) beyond itself which it recognises as its reflection and identifies with as an ideal unified self. This however is a mis-recognition because, as Walton explains,

> … the coherent bounded subject which confronts the child in the image does not correspond to the still inchoate and amorphous infant which has yet to gain control over its fragmented parts (Walton, 2007a:99).

In spite of this the 'mirror' mirage/image initiates a rupture in the bonds with the mother (this is the beginning of the loss of the mother), and prepares the way for the

child's entry into the *symbolic*, the order of language and culture, through the Oedipal crisis (as delineated by Freud). In this way, according to Lacan, language comes into being and the symbolic order is established, as Crownfield elaborates:

> Blocked by the father (not by any behaviour of the father, but by the function, the position, the very existence of the role of the father) from total possession of the mother's desire, the child is forced to substitute other gratifications, other objects of desire, other roles to play or places to play them. This positional logic of substitution, of representing one thing by another, of displacing desire along a chain of representatives, is the foundation of the formal order of language, of what Lacan calls the symbolic order (Crownfield, 1992b: xiii, in Walton, 2007a:99, n77).

This stage is accompanied for every subject by a traumatic sense of loss of wholeness. It marks the end for the infant of what Jasper calls 'his or her previously undifferentiated absorption in the mother or the mother's body' (Jasper, 2007:6), as '[t]his loss continues to exert a strong influence over the developing subject who never ceases in some sense to desire what has been lost' (Jasper, 2007:6). As expressed by Walton:

> Lacan presents an image of the subject which is lacking, desiring and possessing only an ironic cohesion based upon illusion. Entry into language has been achieved at the loss of primordial completeness (Walton, 2007a:99).

In this dynamic process the paternal law, the social and moral order, police a boundary organised to prevent the subject from entering into 'the dangerous and desired proximity of the 'maternal Thing'' (Walton 2007a:99).[39]

[39] I will elaborate on proximity of the 'maternal Thing' being both 'dangerous and desired' in my discussion of *abjection*.

As has been suggested, this scenario is not only developmental, not just a once-and-for-all stage in an individual's development. As Walton asserts, '[t]he process of loss, desire, symbolisation are in fact constitutive of subjectivity throughout human existence' (Walton, 2007a:99). Within this understanding of the subject and the self, the trauma of the loss of the 'maternal Thing' has ongoing monumental impact on the individual. It is not something that the individual can ever recover and enjoy since it exists, as it were, only in its absence. The *real* and *imaginary* stages are identifiable only in relation to the *symbolic*. Lacan's account of the *real,* the *imaginary* and the *symbolic* has been called

> ... a complex engrossing narrative of loss and desire .... It powerfully evokes nostalgia for completeness, whilst also requiring an acceptance of the inevitability of fragmentation. It names the human desire for restored plenitude as the force which drives history while insisting that the quest is based upon a primeval repression (Walton, 2007a:100).

This then is, in outline, Lacan's theory of the emergence of the subject and the subject's acquisition of language. Kristeva was to develop it in a new direction through her understanding of the importance of the maternal body.

Kristeva's re-imaging through the maternal body

As Megan Becker-Leckrone claims in her book, *Julia Kristeva and Literary Theory,* whilst Kristeva engaged with Lacan's theories, she reached still further back chronologically, 'to narrate an emphatically more primordial, extra-linguistic and conflictual story of the subject "in the beginning"'(Becker-Leckrone, 2005:27). She suggests that Lacan's mirror stage tells only part of the story and that 'the distinctions that he makes among the realms of the imaginary, the symbolic and the real in

narrating it are incomplete and too rigidly demarcated'[40] (Becker-Leckrone, 2005:27).

Shifting the focus in the genesis of subjectivity from the role of the father (symbolic and actual) to a focus on the role of the maternal body, in some measure, Kristeva returns to Freud, as unmediated by Lacan, and takes up his understanding of powerful instinctual drives and primary processes at work in the pre-subjective relations of the *real*. These remain unaccounted for in Lacan's theory of the mirror stage (see Becker-Leckrone, 2005:27). Freud's theory of primordial drives is taken up by Kristeva because it offers a way to 'understand the signifying process as bodily or biological as well as social' (Becker-Leckrone, 2005:27). In her book, *Revolution in Poetic Language* (1984), Kristeva describes it as providing a 'bridge between the biological foundation of signifying functioning and its determination by the family and society' (Kristeva, 1984:167 in Becker-Leckrone, 2005:27). Kristeva says of the drives which are heterogeneous, moving the subject in several sometimes contradictory directions at once, 'Drives are [...] the repeated scission of matter that generates significance, the place where an always absent subject is produced' (Kristeva, 1984:167 in Becker-Leckrone, 2005:28).

According to Kristeva, the infant's intimations of self emerge from a multiplicity of bodily sensations experienced while in the maternal space or sphere and are not limited, as with Lacan, to the point of recognition, or misrecognition in the 'mirror'. To describe this she uses the term *semiotic*, which is

> ... an "asymbolic" realm that is not reducible to Lacan's categories of the real or the imaginary and which precedes and exceeds the working of the mirror stage (Becker-Leckrone, 2005:28).

[40] The *real* for Lacan '... stands for what is neither symbolic nor imaginary and remains foreclosed from the analytic experience' (*Écrits* ix).

In Kristeva's early work then, it is not yet language as such, but sound, cries and laughter, gesture and touch, which indicate for her a 'pre-symbolic' dimension to signification. This is bodily and drive-motivated and does not yet have the kind of coherence, and defined structure, nor the spatial fixity that Lacan's three-fold order implies (see Becker-Leckrone, 2005:28).

This bodily symbiosis of mother and infant, the shared smiles, rhythms, sounds and touch, set up and intimate a space without interior or exterior, that Kristeva calls the "semiotic *chora*" As she writes in 'Place Names'

> Chronologically and logically long before the mirror stage the new-born's laughter is a "joy without words", an early creation of the space (the "riant spaciousness") that will only later become the demarcated space between self and other, or between the self and the illusion of self in the mirror stage (Kristeva, 1980:283 [1976,1977], in Becker-Leckrone 2005:28).

Kelly Oliver, an astute commentator on Kristeva's work, claims that it was Kristeva's contention that

> ... both the negation and the identification that are essential to human subjectivity are already operating within the maternal function, [the mother/child relationship], prior to the subject's entrance into language (Oliver, 1993a:3).

In this Kristeva challenges traditional (Freudian and Lacanian) notions of the paternal function as being that which initiates negation and identification from which follow both language and subjectivity. For Kristeva it is before the mirror stage that the infant experiences denial of his/her desires, for example at times the denial of the breast, and this precedes any paternal prohibition. As Oliver notes, for Kristeva, '[e]ven birth itself with one body expelled from another, becomes a prototype for

negation and separation' (Oliver, 1993a:4).

The Semiotic and The Symbolic

The preceding brief review of Lacan's account of the emergence of subjectivity and language and of Kristeva's placing of the maternal body at the centre of the origins of her account of this emergence, opens the way for an exploration of Kristeva's concepts of the semiotic and the symbolic. To emphasise again, my interest here lies with the part these play in offering an account of the operation of language within culture.

In her earliest works (*Desire in Language* 1980 and *Revolution in Poetic Language* 1984), Kristeva developed the crucial concepts of the *semiotic* and the *symbolic,* and the related concepts of the *chora, abjection* and the *thetic break.* In these works, as I have noted, Kristeva reinterprets the relationship between the *real* and the *symbolic* of Lacan and highlights the role of the maternal body in subject formation. She explains her use of the term semiotic thus:

> Before it enters the Symbolic and encounters the No/Name of the Father, the infant has already lived with maternal regulation, the mother's 'no'. The mother regulates the material processes of the infant's body. She oversees what goes into and comes out of the infant's body. She alters the relationship between her own body and the infant's accordingly. The maternal sphere is named the *semiotic.* This term implies, distinctive mark, trace index, precursory sign, proof, engraved or written sign, imprint, trace figuration (Kristeva, 1984:25).

Before commenting further on Kristeva's understanding of the semiotic and the symbolic I will note the different uses of the Symbolic and symbolic as employed in Lacan and Kristeva's work. Oliver spells out the difference in the way in which

Kristeva employs the 'symbolic' and the 'Symbolic'.

> The Symbolic order is the order of signification, the social realm. This realm is composed of both semiotic and symbolic elements. So the semiotic is not strictly opposed to the Symbolic. Rather the semiotic is part of the Symbolic. Which is not to say that it is confined within the Symbolic – although certainly we cannot talk about it except within the Symbolic order, because we cannot talk about anything outside of the Symbolic order. The semiotic moves both inside and beyond the Symbolic. The semiotic, however, does not move within the symbolic [with a lower case s]. Within signification, the symbolic is heterogeneous to the semiotic. The symbolic is the element of signification that structures the possibility of taking a position or making a judgement (Oliver, 1993a:10).

It is significant to note that the relationship between semiotic and symbolic is dialectical, that the semiotic does not simply precede the symbolic. Kristeva has spoken of 'the *logical and chronological priority of the symbolic* in any organisation of the semiotic' (Kristeva, 1983:34 emphasis added), and has also stated, 'this semiotic mode has no primacy, no point of origin'(Kristeva, 1983:37).

The Chora

The term Kristeva uses for the 'maternal space' is *chora*. This is the space where, and the means whereby, the first differentiation between infant and mother, between self and other, takes place in Kristeva's understanding. The word is from the Greek meaning both receptacle and nurse, taken from Plato's *Timaeus*, where it is used to describe a womb-like cave. As Kristeva describes it, 'the *chora* is a womb or nurse in which elements are without identity and without reason. The *chora* is a place of chaos.' (Kristeva, 1973a in Oliver, 1993a:46). For Kristeva the *chora*,

> though strictly inaccessible from within the realm of the *symbolic,* - where we practice language and recognise the authority of the law - gives rise in this pre- or non-verbal context to the *semiotic* or a *semiotic* form of signification (Jasper, 2007:6).

What happens in the *chora* is, in Kristeva's theory, integral to the signifying process. She claims that although

> ... deprived of unity, identity or deity the chora is nevertheless subject to a regulating process ... which is different from that of symbolic law but nevertheless effectuates discontinuities by temporally articulating them and then starting over again and again (Kristeva, 1984:26 in Walton, 2007a:101).

These discontinuities are necessary for entry into the Symbolic realm. In this fashion, for Kristeva, the bodily relation to the mother that ensures the child's survival also enables the infant's entrance into the Symbolic. As Walton expresses it,

> The initial impress of the maternal body is thus experienced in what Kristeva names 'semiotic operations' (Kristeva, 1980:134), the rhythms, intonations and muscular contractions dependent on the body's drives (Walton, 2007a:101).

In this way, the disjunctures necessary for signification are already experienced in the semiotic. Kristeva insists that the body has found its way into language and 'The mother's body is therefore what mediates the symbolic law, organising social relations' (Kristeva, 1984:27 in Walton, 2007a:102).

Again, as in Lacan's account, this is not just a developmental process. Kristeva can conceive of a continuing relation between the maternal and paternal realms within the *subject-in-process* (which for Kristeva is the only way for a subject to be) and for her,

the elements within culture that function to mediate the semiotic in ways that either support or destabilise the social order are *religion* and *art* (see Walton, 2007a:102).

The process of rejection or separation through which the child makes its entrance into the Symbolic order is operative at the border formed by what Kristeva calls the *thetic break* or *thetic cut*. For Kristeva, the two levels of signifying practice, the semiotic and the symbolic, are both separated and distinguished by this *thetic break*.

The Thetic Break

The semiotic then, is constituted, as a place beyond language and as an essential part of the signifying process by the thetic break (see Walton, 2007a:102). The semiotic

> ... exists in practice only within the symbolic and requires the symbolic break to obtain the complex articulation we associate with it in musical and poetic practices. In other words, symbolisation makes possible the complexity of this semiotic combinatorial system, which only theory can isolate as preliminary (Kristeva, 1984:68, in Walton, 2007a:102).

This process of subject-making has implications not just for the individual but for society as a whole. As Walton says, 'The thetic break, which structures the semiotic and positions it in relation to the symbolic is the founding moment, not only of subjectivity but also of civilisation' (Walton, 2007a:102).

I reiterate here, that what happens in art in particular, in terms of the confirmation or destabilisation of the social order is where my main concern lies, and Kristeva's theory of the working of the semiotic and symbolic offers a way of imagining of how this process might function.

Walton is attentive to the role Kristeva gives to both art and religion in this process,

with art being 'the means of revealing the permeability of this boundary [the thetic break] and facilitating the flow of *jouissance* into the symbolic order' (Walton 2007a:102), (in contrast to religion which seeks to mark out and secure this boundary). Walton notes that, for Kristeva, artists are voyagers between worlds. She suggests that

> Artists carry 'death' as a consequence of their willingness to cross the thetic divide (Kristeva 1984:70). They are, nevertheless, able to bring rebirth to cultures which are subject to the excessive domination of 'paternal' authority (Walton, 2007a:103).

It is then, this function of art and artists or, more particularly poets and novelists, to which I am looking for the possibility of cultural change in societies still dominated, if in a less obvious fashion than in the past, by 'paternal' authority.

As has been suggested, this drama is not only acted out in the early years, as Jasper explains,

> ... even for the older speaking subject, periodically, semiotic forms are inserted into the symbolic via the rhythms and sounds of the writer's words or language, upsetting and unsettling the symbolic order and reducing the rigidity so arduously and painfully achieved through the acquisition of language (Jasper, 2007:6).

The thetic break or divide, separating the symbolic and the semiotic, is one which we as subjects in process have continually, as Jasper says, 'to keep crossing throughout life, in an unrelenting effort to maintain a psychic balance between the two key realms characterised as semiotic and symbolic and distinguished by their very different forms of signification' (Jasper, 2007:7).

In reviewing Kristeva's theory, up to this point I have been describing the semiotic as something akin to an empirical entity that exists in fact. Walton has a different view, asserting that for her, the semiotic is not in the nature of a defensible hypothesis concerning the nature of subjectivity and the cultural order but rather

> ... it has the status of an image which displays the dangerous power of the symbolic order (regime) and allows us to imagine the possibility of things beyond language. This image persuasively captures the violence of the cultural order and reveals how essential gender is to the maintenance of power. As the creation of gender lies at the archaic genesis of culture the semiotic appropriately portrays the feminine as that which must be radically excluded and can never be overcome (Walton, 2007a:123-124).

In this iconic sense, according to Walton, literature, by mediating the semiotic, presents us with all that culture must exclude. '... those things which overwhelm subjective discreetness; jouissance, the saity of completeness, the full presence of the other. It also incarnates those things we most dread; death, dismemberment and the uncanny. And all of these things are symbolisable through the female body' (Walton, 2007a:124). I will comment further on this dynamic of exclusion, and what it might imply for actual female bodies in the section on abjection.

Butler's critique of Kristeva

There are those who take issue with Kristeva's theorisation of the workings of the semiotic and have offered substantial reformulations of Kristeva's thinking on this theme. An influential critic is Judith Butler who claims that Kristeva's strategy of subversion of the symbolic by the semiotic proves doubtful. She says that Kristeva's theory 'appears to depend upon the stability and reproduction of precisely the paternal law that she seeks to displace' (Butler, 1990:80). In her critique Butler goes on to question what she sees as several key steps in Kristeva's thinking. She asks if the

primary relationship to the maternal body that Kristeva postulates is a viable and knowable construct (see Butler, 1990:80). She also notes that while the semiotic as it surfaces in poetic language becomes for Kristeva 'a locus of cultural subversion', Kristeva herself also claims that its sustained presence leads to psychosis and the breakdown of cultural life itself, and therefore, Butler concludes, such cultural subversion cannot be sustained. For Butler, Kristeva alternately posits and denies the semiotic as an emancipatory ideal (see Butler, 1990:80). The basic question is, if the Symbolic always asserts its hegemony does the subversion via the semiotic have any lasting meaning?

Thus Butler maintains that for Kristeva it is the pre-cultural maternal realm that provides subversive force, and the force of this subversion is outside of culture; so any possibility of subversion is foreclosed. Butler claims that for Kristeva 'a full–scale refusal of the Symbolic is impossible and a discourse of "emancipation" for Kristeva is out of the question' (Butler, 1990:86).

Butler also asserts that what Kristeva claims to discover in the prediscursive maternal body, is itself a production of 'a given historical discourse, an effect of culture rather than its secret and primary cause (Butler, 1993:165). She contends that

> Even if we accept Kristeva's theory of primary drives, it is unclear that the subversive effects of such drives can serve, via the semiotic, as anything more than a "temporary and futile" disruption of the hegemony of the paternal law (Butler, 1993:165).

As we have seen, and as noted by Butler, Kristeva's strategic task

> ... is not to replace the symbolic with the semiotic, nor to establish the semiotic as a rival cultural possibility but rather to validate those experiences

> within the symbolic that permit a manifestation of the borders that divide the symbolic from the semiotic (Butler, 1993:170).

However for Butler, Kristeva 'does not seriously challenge the structuralist assumption that the prohibitive paternal law is foundational to culture itself. Hence the subversion of paternally sanctioned culture cannot come from another version of culture, but only from within the repressed interior of culture itself, from the heterogeneity of drives that constitute culture's concealed foundation' (Butler, 1993:171).

For Butler, if subversion is possible, it will be 'subversion from within the terms of the law, through the possibilities that emerge when the law turns against itself and spawns unexpected permutations of itself' (Butler, 1993: 178). Butler's conclusion is that in the end 'Kristeva offers us a strategy of subversion that can never become a sustained political practice' (Butler, 1993:166).

In defence of Kristeva, Oliver takes issue with Butler. 'First', she says,

> Kristeva does not delimit maternity as an essentially precultural reality. In fact, Kristeva argues that maternity calls into question the boundary between culture and nature. She chooses maternity as a prototype [for the operation of the semiotic] precisely because it breaks down borders between culture and nature and subject and other (Oliver, 1993a:9n.).

Another feminist critic, Elizabeth Grosz, also argues that 'for Kristeva maternity is subjectless' (Grosz, 1990:161-62 in Oliver, 1993a:9n.). For Oliver this again misses the point of Kristeva's understanding of maternity. She says that

> Kristeva uses maternity as an example of an experience that calls into question any notion of a unified subject. Maternity becomes a prime example of what

> she calls a "subject-in-process". In addition maternity calls into question the border between subject and other; the maternal body encloses an other. With maternity it is impossible to distinguish between subject and object without engaging in an arbitrary categorization. Kristeva analyses maternity in order to suggest that all distinctions between subjects and objects, all identifications of unified subjects are arbitrary (Oliver, 1993a:9n.).

I will go on to enlarge on the use Kristeva makes of this understanding in developing her concept of a new ethics or 'herethics' where she uses maternity as one discourse that models alterity within the subject, the others being poetic language and psychoanalysis.

Kristeva and Poetic Language

Since I am concerned with what language, in particular poetic language (not just poetry but other literary forms), can perform, and the effect this has within culture, one of my main reasons for turning to the work of Kristeva is to engage with her understanding of the 'revolutionary' nature of poetic language. In spite of Butler's sustained critique suggesting that Kristeva's theory of the workings of language, and in particular the operation of the semiotic, always leaves the semiotic ultimately under the ordering of the Symbolic, and her contention that no emancipation is possible outside of the Symbolic system, I find in Kristeva's work a creative way of thinking of the possible disruptive effects of poesis within culture.

Kristeva separates herself from Lacan on the question of language, specifically from what she sees as Lacan's over-reliance on an '"always already there" of language' which 'prevents him from attending adequately to the subtle and shadowy universe of signification that "cannot be reduced" to meaning in a properly linguistic sense' (Becker-Leckrone, 2005:28). She seeks to theorise the unsymbolizable, 'that which lurks at or is shunted to, the limits of both symbolic structures and analyses of them'

(Becker-Leckrone, 2005:29). Kristeva says that

> … the real stakes of a discourse on childhood within western thought involve a confrontation between thought and what is not, a wandering at the limits of the unthinkable (Kristeva 1977a, 1980:276, in Becker-Leckrone, 2005:29).[41]

Writing specifically on the relationship between theology and literature, Walton highlights the importance of the literature to Kristeva;

> What is evident from the earliest texts is the huge significance Kristeva accords to literature (Walton, 2007a:121)

> This is the space of the not true, the not complete, the not normal. Literature is where language does not behave in a regular manner and where communication is both intensified and broken …. It is an oppositional term regarded as a precious resource in a culture which is powerfully regulated. In Kristeva's vocabulary literature becomes the language of revolt (Walton, 2007a:122).

In her recent paper, 'Revolt She Said!' Jasper asserts that Kristeva takes 'revolution' or 'revolt' (with its correlative 'liberty' or 'freedom'), as a defining motif in reviewing her work over past 35 years (see Jasper 2007:1) and that this can be traced from *Revolution in Poetic Language* (1974) through to most recent work *The Sense and Non-Sense of Revolt* (2001), *Revolt She Said* (2002) and *Intimate Revolt* (2002). This revolt is based on a 'deep sense of self-questioning and questioning tradition' (Kristeva, 2002:85 in Jasper 2007:1). Kristeva seems to Jasper to 'use 'revolution' as a subtly ironic term for the sort of relentless scrutiny that will foster a resilient, 'authoritative' sense of self capable of resisting all totalitarianisms or forms of

[41] In Chapter 2 on 'Testimony' I have already engaged with some of the issues involved with representing what cannot be symbolised in language, **thinking impossibility** and **saying the unsayable.**

tyranny (Kristeva, 2002:86,91) but that has no final - or closed-off – destination' (Jasper, 2007:1). Human beings in Kristeva's understanding, continually need to question and thus 'revolt against' the structures in their lives, '[b]ecause it's precisely by putting things into question that 'values' stop being frozen dividends and acquire a sense of mobility, polyvalence and life' (Kristeva, 2002:12 in Jasper 2007:2). Revolt understood in this sense is an important dynamic in cultural change.

In *Revolution in Poetic Language*, Kristeva equates poetic revolution to political revolution. As Oliver sees it, in her understanding of language, she maintains that

> ... elements of material rejection and identification that she associates with the maternal "semiotic" make their way into language, and that all signification is driven by dialectic between semiotic drive force and symbolic stases (Oliver, 1993a:8).

For Kristeva, this very dialectic oscillation occurring between the semiotic and the symbolic is what makes possible new types of discourse. For her '[t]he infusion of semiotic elements within signification can actually change the structure of discourse' (Oliver, 1993a:8). One possible effect of this is that

> ... violent, aggressive, and anti-social drives can be discharged in a relatively harmless, perhaps even productive, way. Another more significant effect of this is that our traditional or dominant discourses and representations can be changed (Oliver 1993a:8)[42].

Kristeva writes,

> .... poetic language in its most disruptive form (unreadable for meaning, dangerous for the subject) shows the constraints of a civilisation dominated by

[42] It has been argued by some critics that her work has changed over time and that latterly she has given up the dialectic between semiotic and symbolic - the semiotic becoming completely co-opted and losing its revolutionary force (see Oliver 1993a: 8-9).

> transcendental rationality. Consequently it is a means of overriding this constraint ....
>
> This means that if [the] poetic economy has always born witness to crises and impossibilities of transcendental symbolics, in our times it is coupled with crises of social institutions (state, family, religion), and more profoundly a turning point in the relationship of man[sic] to meaning (Kristeva, 1980:140 in Walton, 2007a:104).

The question of whether for those seeking a new social vision there is a legitimate if complementary path to that of protest, political campaigns or educational initiatives, to be found in the operation of literature, is one that surfaces again and again in this thesis. On this matter, Walton asserts that 'the revolutionary function of the artist [is] not to criticise or to campaign for some new social vision but to assault the signifying system upon which the father's law is based' (Walton, 2007a:104). This question will be addressed again when considering options open to feminists who seek cultural change. It also lurks behind much of the criticism of Coetzee for his apparent lack of politically engaged writing during the years of apartheid in South Africa, which is an issue I will address in a subsequent chapter.

One issue that Kristeva's own use of literary texts has thrown up has been concerning the ideological/ethical content of such writing. Walton notes Lechte's comment, that 'the ethical function of a text has nothing to do with ideological purity but with a semiotic process which "pluralises", pulverises, musicates all ossified forms' (Lechte, 1990:139 in Walton, 2007a:104). In other words the revolutionary effect of a text does not depend on its content, and Kristeva certainly engaged with texts that appear in content to denigrate women and other minorities. As has been noted, in this mapping of the revolutionary nature of literature, Kristeva is as much concerned with the form of literature as with the content, for it is form that can shatter expectations and destabilise understandings. In her early work she principally engages with innovative linguistic forms that typify modernist literature; the kind of 'poetic language' which

can achieve such disruption. For Kristeva, it is not the signifying function of this kind of language, or the realities it alludes to, that gives it revolutionary potential, but rather its anarchic form (see Walton, 2007a:103). There are indeed different varieties of form in modernist literature, which I will examine in my engagement with the work of Coetzee in Chapters Six and Seven. As noted by Walton, what Kristeva is suggesting is that these forms accomplish

> a fracturing of the symbolic by allowing the repressed rhythms and impulses of the semiotic back into signification. In artistic practices the semiotic, the precondition of the symbolic, is revealed as that which also threatens the symbolic with destruction.[43] For Kristeva this linguistic function is of the strongest political significance (Walton, 2007a:103).

My engagement with the work of Paul Celan in the preceding chapter also revealed the unique nature of poetic language in this respect. It is language that can represent a wide range of difference and yet maintain its integrity as language, although in Celan's case this integrity was put under extreme pressure, almost to the point of breakdown. As Oliver expresses it:

> Poetic language is language which is also not language, language which is other to itself. Meaningful but non-signifying aspects of language – rhythm, tone, music – are just as important in poetry as the signifying elements of language. In poetry it is obvious that words are both meaningful for what they signify and meaningful for how they sound and affect the listener. Poetry points to this heterogeneity of language. Kristeva argues that it shows most clearly how signification comes to be out of nonsignifying, semiotic, bodily drives (Oliver, 1993b:2).

[43] This analysis resonates with Levinas's description of the struggle between the Saying and the Said in language.

Kristeva argues as the rhythm of poetic language passes through symbolic theses, 'meaning is constituted but is then immediately exceeded by what seems outside of meaning: materiality' (Kristeva, 1984:17 in Oliver 1993b:2).

> The pleasure found in drive-discharge through language is in excess of meaning and representation. The materiality of language itself can discharge drives through the symbolic but always necessarily in excess of the symbolic. It is not that language represents the drive, which is impossible. Rather, language, specifically poetic and avant garde language can *reactivate* drives. And it is precisely because this drive discharge is not representation that poetic language "pulverizes" signification. Poetry is a type of borderland case that calls into question all that is central to representation. In addition to the discharge drive, poetry "pre-alters" representation by showing the *process* of representation itself.[44] Poetry can function to reveal how signifiers and signified are produced (Oliver, 1993b:2-3).

As I have noted, Kristeva's does not appear to want to replace the symbolic with the semiotic, nor to establish the semiotic as a rival cultural possibility but rather to validate those experiences within the symbolic that reveal the borders that divide the symbolic from the semiotic. Kristeva identifies three spheres overall in which this is apparent: poetic language, maternity and the practice of psychoanalysis.

Alice Jardine in her reading of Kristeva found that some basic questions became increasingly more insistent and explicit. She asks,

> How can we give a sign, a discourse, to that which is and has been repressed throughout Western history? How can we find a subject for what has been repressed while avoiding [these] two extremes: psychic explosion and psychic

[44] Such self-conscious foregrounding of the literary and constructed nature of the text will be an aspect of the work of Coetzee that I will highlight in a later chapter.

> censorship? What can be new modalities for reshaping the monological and monotheistic laws at the foundation of our Western culture without inviting the return of the repressed in its potentially monstrous and apocalyptic reality (Jardine, 1993:25-26).

Kristeva offers poetic language as a possible answer.

For Kristeva then, literary works, and particularly avant-garde linguistic forms will always accompany crises within social institutions and bear witness to 'the moment of their mutation, evolution, revolution, or disarray (Kristeva, 1980:124 in Walton, 2007a:104). She returns to the importance of the role of literature in bearing witness to cultural crises, again at the end of her book *Powers of Horror* (1982), and to the fact that in the disruption of discourses that these forms enact, there may also be an unveiling of what for Kristeva is a key element in subject formation; the abject. She expresses this in the last chapter of *Powers of Horror*, thus:

> I wish to point out that, far from being a minor marginal activity in our culture, as a general consensus seems to have it, this kind of literature [Céline's] or even literature as such, represents the ultimate coding of our crises, of our most intimate and serious apocalypses ....
>
> Because it occupies its place, because it hence decks itself out in the sacred power of horror, literature may also involve not an ultimate resistance to but an unveiling of the abject: an elaboration, a discharge, and a hollowing out of abjection through the Crisis of the Word (Kristeva, 1982:208).

The Abject – Something to be Scared of?

It is in *Powers of Horror* that Kristeva gives full expression to her understanding of the concept of 'abjection'. This provides an account of the emergence of the subject

through a process of separation from that which deeply attracts and repels in equal measure. It is a process involving 'intense joy, pleasure, beauty and promise' existing 'in close proximity to violence and horror' (Becker-Leckrone, 2005: 30).

As already noted, desire, for Lacan as for Kristeva, means loss, lack, want, but Kristeva 'locates the inaugural 'experience of *want*' at a moment more 'preliminary to being and object' than Lacan's mirror stage' (Becker-Leckrone, 2005:31). I note again her understanding of the 'immemorial violence' even of birth 'with which a body becomes separated from another body in order to be' (Kristeva, 1982:10, in Becker-Leckrone, 2005:32). These first moments of separation of self from other prepare the 'structures of meaning [that] govern and condition me' and 'demarcate a space out of which signs and objects arise' (Kristeva, 1982:5 in Becker-Leckrone 2005:32).

Anna Smith claims that for Kristeva

> ... abjection appears to be a founding moment for all subjects. As a revolt of and against the being that gives us existence, Kristeva argues that before we have yet been formed as speaking beings and before our world has acquired the coherence of objects for us, there exists an abject borderline state we inhabit. Our identity runs all over the place ... whenever it meets up with boundaries and barriers, we experience a traumatic sense of upheaval. This moment therefore marks the beginnings of separation from the undifferentiated relationship previously experienced with the mother (Smith, 1996:149).

This trauma and violence of separation signals a dynamic that shapes the subject not just in the beginning but always. The abject harkens back both to individual and collective beginnings, but also can occur at any time. It can return at moments of strain and times of crisis. It brings to attention the boundaries that distinguish self from other (see Becker-Leckrone, 2005: 30). In abjection 'I behold the breaking down

of a world that has erased its borders' (Kristeva, 1982:4).

As Smith asserts,

> ... abjection actually *founds* the signifying economy of our culture and its characteristics of 'rejecting, separating, repeating/abjecting' (Kristeva, 1982: 15) are present in the symbolic in any cultural and intellectual activities relating to denial and negation, differentiation, repetition, moving from inside to outside, setting up boundaries (Smith, 1996:149).

The threat to the subject, which leads to abjection, is the threat of demarcation lines blurring and of things ceasing to be themselves. Abjection concerns fear of 'neither objects nor other subjects, but rather the threat of indistinction between the two – a crisis of place and identity' (Becker-Leckrone, 2005:33). For Kristeva 'abjection names not a thing but a potentiality, a gravitational field that summons the subject from its proper place to a no-man's land where the subject is not only 'beside himself' but also almost ceases to be' (Becker-Leckrone, 2005:33). As Kristeva has it the abject is '[n]ot me. Not that. But not nothing either. A weight of meaninglessness, about which there is nothing insignificant and which crushes me. On the edge of non-existence and hallucination, of a reality that, if I acknowledge it, annihilates me' (Kristeva, 1982:2). She also says that within the abject there 'looms [...] one of those violent dark revolts of being, directed against a threat that seems to emanate from an exorbitant outside or inside, ejected beyond the scope of the possible, the tolerable, the thinkable' (Kristeva, 1982:1).

At once attractive and repulsive, the threat within abjection

> ... lies there, quite close, but it cannot be assimilated. It beseeches, worries, and fascinates desire, which, nevertheless, does not let itself be seduced. Apprehensive, desire turns aside; sickened, it rejects [...] Unflaggingly, like an

> inescapable boomerang, a vortex of summons and repulsion places the one haunted by it literally beside himself (Kristeva, 1982:1).

In *Powers of Horror*, Kristeva gives two main examples of the process of abjection, the first an example of food loathing.[45] It expresses a drive to separate me from a not me that the I cannot bear to assimilate and yet from which it cannot cleanly part. The 'spasms and vomiting [...] protect me' in such instances but at a risk. In expelling the abject 'I expel *myself*, I spit *myself* out, I abject *myself* within the same motion through which 'I' claim to establish *myself* (Kristeva, 1982:3, Kristeva's emphasis).

Kristeva's other main example is that of a corpse. 'The corpse, seen without God and outside of science, is the utmost of abjection. It is death infecting life' (Kristeva, 1982:4). A corpse brings death itself unbearably close to us 'as in the true theatre, without make up or masks, corpses *show me* what I permanently thrust aside in order to live (Kristeva, 1982:3 Kristeva's emphasis).

Powers of Horror is not simply part of a treatise or the outlining of a theory, it performs[46] that which it discusses and inspires the destabilisation it describes. Chapter One disorientates the reader. Bearing witness to the intense experience of abjection and the theoretical exploration of it are thus implicated with one another from the beginning (see Becker-Leckrone, 2005: 35). Kristeva's critical language enacts what it also describes: 'a radical disruption of the borders that separate the subject from its objects, the "I" from the "not I", from the encroachment of a horrifying "something" that is neither subject nor object' (Becker-Leckrone, 2005:35). Kristeva's own writing is like the abject at once 'unapproachable and intimate' (Kristeva, 1982:6 in Becker-

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[45] 'Food loathing is perhaps the most elementary and most archaic form of abjection. When eyes see or lips touch that skin on the surface of milk .... I experience a gagging sensation and, still farther down, spasms in the stomach, the belly; and all the organs shrivel up the body, provoke tears and bile, increase heartbeat, cause forehead and hands to perspire. Along with slight clouding dizziness, *nausea* makes me balk at that milk cream, separates me from the mother and father who proffer it "I" want none of that element, sign of their desire, "I" do not want to listen, "I" do not assimilate it, "I" expel it (Kristeva, 1982:3).

[46] I will return to the concept of the 'performativity' of literature with regard to Levinas's work *Otherwise Than Being* and it will form part of the discussion of Coetzee's work in this thesis.

Leckrone, 2005:36). As Becker-Leckrone has identified,

> The texture and accumulation of Kristeva's sentences here – nuanced with dependant clauses, riddled with oblique pronouns and allusive etymologies, layered with repeated proposals to tell us what the abject is, largely by declaring what it is not - precisely act out what they aim to describe (Becker-Leckrone, 2005:36).

In her own literary studies, Kristeva privileges this kind of discourse: 'liminal, "literary" discourses that manage to approach the abject without evasion' (Becker-Leckrone, 2005:36). Through 'thoroughly poetic mimesis' she strives for a mode of representation that does not describe but rather 'incarnates' abjection in its very rhythms and contours, a discourse "not of purification but of rebirth with and against abjection"' (Kristeva, 1982:31 in Becker-Leckrone, 2005:37).

Bearing in mind my original quest for understanding of the phenomenon of violence against women, and that Kristeva's concept of abjection is a symbolic explanation of processes that affect the subject-in–process, I am interested in the significance to this issue of the fact that in this account it is the Mother and mother's body which becomes *abject* in this process. While the main focus of this thesis remains on the role of literature in opening the way for change in society, in the next section I will explore further the possible implications for women of the outworking of abjection.

Abjection and Violence to Women

As Smith writes 'Abjection unchecked recalls a state *prior* to signification, where there are destructive self seeking drives but no symbolic system in a firm enough position to repress or displace these drives into speech' (Smith, 1996:150). Smith quotes Burgin who claims that it is 'not woman as such who is abjected but rather woman as privileged signifier of that which man both fears and desires: the extinction

of identity itself' (Burgin, 1990:117 in Smith 1996:152). It is possible to locate a link between women's oppression and Kristeva's theorizing of motherhood and abjection. She describes a phase in which a child must abject its mother in order to separate from her. Or more accurately, the child/adult must abject the 'maternal container' (see Oliver, 1993a: 6). As Oliver spells it out, the child/adult

> ... does not need to abject the mother's body as the body of a woman. It does not need to abject its mother herself as a person. Rather it needs to abject the maternal container upon which it has been dependent in order to be weaned from the mother. In our culture, however, since the maternal function is not separated from our representations of women or the feminine, women them selves have become abjected within our society (Oliver, 1993a: 6).[47]

As I have indicated, for Kristeva, that which causes us horror, that which repels and from which we must separate, attracts in equal measure, and this leads her to explore 'our earliest attempts to release the hold of the maternal entity' (Kristeva, 1982:13). As ever for Kristeva this is both a personal struggle and one that is acted out within culture. There are in both spheres instances in which as Walton expresses it, 'the maternal hold is so powerful that the strongest force must be expended to achieve release into the social/symbolic order' (Walton, 2007a:108).

> But devotees of the abject...do not cease looking within what flows from the other's 'innermost being' for the desirable and terrifying nourishment and murderous, fascinating and abject inside of the maternal body ... the advent of one's own identity demands a law that mutilates whereas jouissance demands an *abjection* from which identity becomes absent (Kristeva 1982:54, in Walton, 2007a: 108).

[47] Oliver would assert that in her linking of women with the maternal, that Kristeva is not an essentialist and that 'Her discussion of the maternal is always framed within a discussion of *discourses* on maternity. And she tries to create her own discourse of maternity. She makes this attempt because she believes that we can change the social structure by changing representation. All of her work is an attempt to change representation and thereby change the social' (Oliver, 1993a:7 n.)

Walton notes that in *Powers of Horror,* Kristeva looks at cultures where fear of defilement and ritual impurity are most active, and finds that there the renunciation of the maternal is least secure.

> In societies where it occurs, ritualization of defilement is accompanied by a strong concern for separating the sexes, and this means giving men rights over women. In these contexts women, apparently put in the position of passive objects, are none the less felt to be cunning powers, 'baleful schemers' from whom rightful beneficiaries must protect themselves. That 'other sex', the feminine, becomes synonymous with a radical evil that is to be suppressed (Kristeva, 1982:70 in Walton, 2007a:108).

Examining ancient Judaism, Kristeva identifies that 'paternal anxiety manifest in dietary and behavioural regulation, transforms itself into an ethics of purity and impurity based upon a horror (abjection) of maternal power' (Walton, 2007a: 108). Extending her examination to Christianity, and the prohibitions put in place to contain the threatening feminine, she finds that 'The brimming flesh of sin belongs, of course, to both sexes; but its root and basic representation is nothing other than feminine temptation' (Kristeva, 1982:126 in Walton, 2007a:108).

Kristeva comes to the conclusion in *Powers of Horror,* that what diffuses the horror of abjection and reveals the violence at the foundation of society is art, particularly literature. Kristeva claims that the aesthetic task which she sees as '- a descent into the foundations of the symbolic construct', amounts to

> retracing the fragile limits of the speaking being, closest to its dawn ... 'subject' and 'object' push each other away, confront each other, collapse and start again – inseparable, contaminated, condemned, at the boundary of what is assimilable, thinkable: abject. Great modern literature unfolds over that

> terrain: Dostoevsky, Lautreamont, Proust, Artaud, Kafka, Céline (Kristeva, 1982:18 in Walton, 2007a:109).

Some of the writers to whom Kristeva turns in her examination of literature that accomplishes this 'purifying task' of abjection, such as Céline, write of violence done to women and offer representations of death (see Walton, 2007a: 109). They appear to be fascists and 'haters' of the mother. Kristeva explains her engagement with them thus:

> Because it occupies such a place, because it here decks itself out in the sacred powers of horror, literature may also involve not an ultimate resistance to, but an unveiling of the abject (Kristeva, 1982:208, in Walton, 2007a:109).

There have been objections expressed that *Powers of Horror* itself performs an unstated elision between the maternal real and women. As Braidotti has protested '... women become assimilated to Woman, as a sign for the feminine ... [in *Powers of Horror*]. No attempt is made to theorise this slippage' (Braidotti, 1991: 231 in Walton, 2007a:109). Similarly it has been suggested that the materiality of the metaphor used in the book cannot be avoided:

> ... to read Kristeva's use of the maternal as more metaphorical than biological presents at least the same problems that many feminists find in separating Lacan's notion of the phallus from the actual penis. Can metaphors be separated from their roots? (Edelstein, 1992:42, in Walton, 2007a:109-110).

With my knowledge of the terrible violence done to women, I echo Edelstein's concern expressed here as to the materiality that is always behind or implicated in the metaphorical. My concern increases on noting Kristeva's account of the relation of the subject-in-progress to the maternal as she expresses it in her book *Black Sun* which was concerned with melancholy and mourning. Ziarek comments that in this work of

Kristeva's,

> The encounter with the maternal is no longer even ambivalent but seems to be accomplished entirely in negative terms as a psychosis of the subject and a crisis of the symbolic order. Kristeva herself occupies a defensive position and accepts violence as the only possible response to the mother: 'matricide is our vital necessity, the *sine qua non* condition of individuation.' The ethos of this position only confirms the primacy of identity and its violence in Western metaphysics (Ziarek, 1993:75, in Walton, 2007a:116).

'Women's Time'

Kristeva had earlier explored the violence that she saw as integral to the emergence of identity, without the use of such a disturbing metaphor as the necessity of 'matricide'. In an early essay, 'Women's Time' (Kristeva 1981), discussed by Alison Weir in her book *Sacrificial Logics* (1996), Kristeva envisions a society in which the sacrificial basis of social relations and institutions is replaced by an

> *interiorization of the founding separation of the sociosymbolic contract,* as an introduction of its cutting edge into the very interior of every identity whether subjective, sexual, ideological (Kristeva, 1981:34 in Weir, 1996:148).

According to Weir, Kristeva argues that the exposure, by feminism, of the patriarchal domination that exists in society, is a stage we can move beyond. Our recognition of this struggle must lead not to a reconciliation with an order of domination, but rather to an eradication of domination. This requires that

> the struggle, the implacable difference, the violence be conceived in the very place where it operates with the maximum intransigence, in other words, in

> personal and sexual identity itself, so as to make it disintegrate in its very nucleus (Kristeva, 1981:34 in Weir, 1996:149).

She conjectures that 'a non–patriarchal, non-dominating social order *not* based on the sacrifice of women, or of any social group or individual by another, would have to be based on a form of self identity, and of social identity, characterized by an *acceptance* of a "founding separation", this acceptance beginning with a social and individual recognition and acceptance of violence inherent in it (Weir, 1996:148-149).

Here Weir suggests that Kristeva is 'calling for a *differentiation* between the violence of separation which is unavoidable, and the violence of domination, which can perhaps be overcome' (Weir, 1996:150). She recognises that in Kristeva's analysis, although there may be

> the experience of pain and loss in the process of differentiating self from other, of recognizing the other's separateness, and in the process recognizing one's own partiality, one's own limitations and responsibilities, this must be accepted as an inevitable part of the process of becoming an individual in a social world. But the violence of this founding separation and of the aggressions and desires it involves must be clearly distinguished from and accepted in order to achieve the end of the violence of domination of one group by another, one person by another, or indeed the defensive repudiation of parts of the self (Weir, 1996:150).

This interiorisation of the founding separation that we all have to experience to become individual beings, in Kristeva's account, means the development of a different form of identity: 'an identity founded not on a defensive opposition to the other, but on an acceptance of internal differentiation – an acceptance of the otherness

within the self'(Weir, 1996:150).[48] A similar point is made by Richard Kearney in his book, *Strangers, Gods and Monsters,* when he says that

> ... we often project onto others those unconscious fears from which we recoil in ourselves. Rather than acknowledge that we are deep down answerable to an alterity which unsettles us, we devise all kinds of evasion strategies. Primary among these is the attempt to simplify our existence by scapegoating others as aliens. (Kearney, 2002:5).

According to Weir, Kristeva stresses that the development of self-identity, far from requiring the repression of pleasure, is in fact itself a *pleasurable* process. The pleasure of differentiation, of the capacity to mark ourselves off from others, the pleasure of identification and interaction with others, the pleasure of learning to engage in a social world, are all essential to the formation of self-identity. So 'The development of self identity need not be of a lonely isolated self ... rather, it can be seen as the development of a capacity for *participation* in a social world' (Weir, 1996: 151).

In 'Women's Time' therefore, Kristeva insists that there can be no society without a 'socio-symbolic contract' and that requires a 'founding separation, some sort of "break-producing symbolism"' (Weir, 1996:173). However she argues, according to Weir, that this symbolism need not be the sacrifice of the Woman/Mother and she asserts that we need a different basis for social community, and also for self identity (see Weir, 1996:173).

Kristeva argues for an end to the fantasy of total gratification in an 'archaic, full, total, englobing mother with no frustration, no separation' because this is itself a product of the patriarchal order, and underpins that order. (Kristeva, 1981:27, in Weir, 1996:173)

[48] 'Kristeva makes this argument again in her book *Strangers to Ourselves,* where she says simply that we need to recognize and accept difference within ourselves, in order to accept the difference of others' (Weir, 1996:201 n.7).

As Weir understands Kristeva's analysis, it is that

> .... we need to expose the ways in which the order of patriarchy is dependent upon the dream of gratification with the mother. We need to show how the mystic of motherhood serves to appease and contain both men's and women's desires for immediacy, for pleasure.
>
> We need to show, also, how the construction of the mother as the all-powerful, all-enveloping womb, as a place of utter peace – and therefore death – serves to warn the subject against any attempt at escape from identity and identification with a patriarchal order (Weir, 1996:173).

In examining the concept of the abject I noted that the maternal is constructed as that which is both idealised and dreaded, and the problems created for women by the identification of this abject maternal with real women. Weir claims that 'the relation to the mother must be reformulated if we want to reformulate identity. For only once we can recognize our mothers' difference and complexity can we recognize our own' (Weir, 1996:181). She says that

> The mother's relation to the symbolic provides a means of reconciling differentiation and identification for the child: the child is able to identify as a self by identifying with the mother's investment in the socio-symbolic order ... the mother is able to serve as a model of a subject "unified in division", ... who can sustain her identity in division (Weir, 1996:183).

This early thinking of Kristeva as interpreted by Weir offers a hopeful model of 'subject formation' It opens up the possibility of

> ... a form of self-identity not based on the repudiation of the mother, nor on an identity with a Unique inaccessible Woman, nor on an identificatory merging with the mother, nor on an identity as a separate isolated self. The differentiation of self is a process which entails a recognition of and identification with the mother's investment in the world, which facilitates the capacity to participate in a social world. That capacity is essential to the ability to understand that world – and essential to the ability to change it (Weir, 1996: 183).

Herethics

In the 1990s Kristeva developed her thinking on the 'subject-in-process' accepting the alterity within his/herself and employed this as a model for fresh thinking on ethics.

Following the publication of *Back Sun*, Kristeva turned to writing fiction. I do not have the scope to engage with Kristeva's novels here, but as Jasper understands it, 'the process of writing novels is for Kristeva an attempt to re-engage with politics or ethics on the micro-level, giving her readers ... scope and encouragement for the projection of fantasies that they can then interpret in the process of seeking healing for their losses and access to their revolutionary energies' (Jasper, 2007:10).

Jasper also claims that at the same period in which she was exploring such micro-engagement in her novels, Kristeva re-engages with politics in the macro-political sense in books such as *Strangers to Ourselves* (1991), and *Nations without Nationalism* (1990). These appeared to be a response to growing xenophobia in France and her own experience as a foreigner within that society. In these works she builds up her theory of 'heretical ethics' or 'herethics'.

'In *Strangers to Ourselves*, Kristeva says:

> Strangely the foreigner lives within us: he [sic] is the hidden face of our identity, the space that wrecks our abode, the time in which understanding affinity founder (Kristeva 1991: 1 in Walton 2007a: 118).

In this book she examines traditional theories of foreignness seeking reformulated notions of difference and otherness so that a new way might be mapped out in which to live with 'the foreigner' without denying her/his difference. Such reimagining of an understanding of 'otherness' or 'foreigner', also involves a fresh conception of 'sameness' or 'the citizen'. Such a process calls into question the very distinction between citizen and foreigner or subject and other (see Oliver, 1993a:12-13).

In *Strangers to Ourselves* Kristeva identifies the other as being within the subject as well as outside, although the alterity in the subject is not the same as the otherness of the other, the 'other can relate to an other as other because she is other to herself' (Oliver, 1993b:13). As Oliver expresses it:

> Just as Kristeva attempts to bring the speaking body back into language by putting the logic of language into the body, she attempts to bring the subject into the place of the other, by putting the other into the subject. Just as she sees the pattern and logic of language within the body, she sees the pattern and logic of alterity within the subject (Oliver, 1993b:13).

Thus, in her analysis, Kristeva identifies the social relation as being modelled within the subject themselves.

The three key discourses in which the 'other' in the 'self' can be most readily experienced are those where Kristeva sees the semiotic surfacing. Firstly, she identifies this in maternity, in a newly conceived relation between mother and child (see Oliver, 1993a:8). Maternity is a *material* model of alterity within identity, where

identity is infused with alterity without completely breaking down. However, lest we are tempted to romanticise it, Walton cautions that this realm is not all sweetness and light since it is, in Kristeva's understanding, also 'the realm of horror, abjection and death' (Walton, 2007a:105).

For Kristeva, psychoanalysis is also a model for ethics, in that it also involves an embrace of the stranger within ourselves. Psychoanalysis is the theory and practice of alterity within identity.

> Psychoanalysis is experienced as a journey into the strangeness of the other and oneself towards an ethic of respect for the irreconcilable. How could one tolerate a foreigner if one did not know one was a stranger to oneself? And to think it has taken such a long time for that small truth ... to enlighten the people of our time! Will it allow them to put up with one another as irreducible because they are desiring, desirable mortal and death bearing? (Kristeva, 1991:182).

Once again in Kristeva's work there is an equation of the personal and the political. As Jasper has pointed out 'Herethics', as found in psychoanalysis, 'builds on the possibilities afforded by the recognition that, in psychoanalytical terms, the desire for the mother and the need to separate from her represent a continuing pattern (of abjection) reflected in the political as well as in the subjective context'(Jasper 2007:10). The ethics that is an inherent part of psychoanalysis also implies a *politics* of difference.

Poetic language is the final model for ethics for Kristeva. As has been noted, poetic language is such that it discharges semiotic elements, negativity, alterity into the Symbolic. In poetic language identity is infused with alterity without completely breaking down. 'Undeniable within poetic language, the semiotic element disrupts the unity of the Symbolic and thereby disrupts the unity of the subject of/in language

(Oliver, 1993a:13). The ethics of poetic language also then implies a politics of difference.

In exploring these discourses that model the ethical relationships, Kristeva has, as ever, a concern for border-lands. As Oliver interprets this, her thinking is that

> We must learn to live within the flexible always precarious borders of our subjectivity in order to learn to live within the flexible always precarious borders of human society. We must unravel the double bind between completely inhabiting the Symbolic - and thereby taking up a rigid unified subject position - and refusing the Symbolic - and thereby inhabiting psychosis (Oliver, 1993a:13).

Compellingly, when considering the relationship between poetic language and ethics, for Kristeva '[t]he ethical cannot be stated, instead it is practiced to the point of loss, and the text is one of the most accomplished examples of such a practice' (Kristeva, 1984:234).

Traditionally ethics has been seen as 'rules', 'principles' that ensure the cohesiveness of a particular group but for Kristeva and 'herethics' it is found at the point where mores and existing moral codes are shattered

> in order to give way to the free play of negativity, need, desire, pleasure and jouissance, before being put together again, although temporarily and with full knowledge of what is involved (Kristeva, 1980:28, in Jardine, 1993:25).

For Kristeva then, in the late twentieth century in the West, the only possible model for the ethical is what she terms

> negativization of narcissism within a practice ... what is ethical is a practice which dissolves narcissistic fixations - dissolving them before they become rigidified as sociosymbolic structures. And that is the ethical - hence political - function of an artistic and theoretical practice which ruptures the representations of even the most liberal and progressive discourse (Jardine, 1993:26).

Kristeva reviewing the last thirty years of her work describes it, as 'a quest to see how far *literature* could probe and penetrate this cultural crisis' (Walton, 2007a:120). She has tried 'to see how far literature could go as a journey to the end of night, the end of the limit of meaning' (Kristeva, 2000:112 in Walton, 2007a:120).

> This journey to the end of night is not undertaken to restore what has been lost, but rather as a gesture of faith in the vitality of the *imaginary which is the frail but living source of new social configurations* (Walton, 2007a:121 emphasis added).

Chapter 4

Emmanuel Levinas

The caress of love, always the same, in the last accounting (for him that thinks in counting) is always different and overflows with exorbitance the songs, poems and admissions in which it is said in so many different ways and through so many themes, in which it is apparently forgotten (Levinas, 1981:184).

...if the question of literature obsesses us...this half century since the war, this is precisely because literature troubles the very regimes of essence and truth. (Derrida, 1992: 48).

As I outlined in the first chapter, the central task of this thesis is to explore the contention, framed by Chopp, that a poetics of testimony might play a role in disrupting the social imaginary. My particular concern is that social imaginaries of many different cultures the world over appear to make possible, or at least do not render impossible, violence committed by men against women, because they are women. I am therefore looking to the disruption, interruption and reshaping of social imaginaries as one strategic response, among many other more conventional ones, to the current situation as regards violence against women. In this search, I am also looking to go beyond Chopp's understanding of poetics of 'testimony' to explore how literature more broadly understood, might effect such disruption.

It is at this point that I ask if social imaginaries consist in shared values and forms of behaviour, how might a shared ethical code shape such values and behaviour. I am also concerned with the question of what shapes a response to an other, any other, to be a response of violence or of concern. One twentieth century writer and philosopher whose thinking engages me because his work has been centrally concerned with what might constitute ethics, is Emmanuel Levinas. His construal of ethics is distinctive and drawn solely from what he sees as the nature of the relationship between the Self and the Other. Having first outlined the key concepts of Levinasian ethics, I will

examine what response can be made from within this framework to interpersonal violence. I will then continue my exploration of the role of literature and its effect within the social imaginary, by reviewing what has been called Levinas's 'literary turn' and his understanding of the operation of language. Aspects of his thinking in this respect will find echoes in the fiction of Coetzee that I will explore in the second half of this work. Finally in this chapter I will turn to feminist readings of Levinas's use of the concept of the 'feminine' in his work.

Emmanuel Levinas was born in Lithuania to Jewish parents in 1906. He has described this as one of the parts of Eastern Europe in which Judaism 'knew its highest spiritual development' and where Talmudic study was a way of life (see Chanter, 2001:6) and this religious background resounds in his work. He became resident in France in 1923 and from 1928 to 1929 lived in Germany where he studied under Husserl and, later, Heidegger. His philosophy is directly influenced by his experiences during World War II. Many of his close family members died in the Holocaust and as a French citizen and soldier he became a prisoner of war in Germany, forced to undertake hard labour. One of the effects of this war time experience was a crisis in his relation to Heidegger, who had affiliated himself with National Socialism during the war. 'One can forgive many Germans,' Levinas once wrote, 'but there are some Germans it is difficult to forgive. It is difficult to forgive Heidegger' (Levinas, 1994:25).

Although he wrote many books and articles before his death in 1995 Levinas's major works are considered to be *Totality and Infinity* (1969 [1961]) and *Otherwise than Being* (1981).

Ethics as first philosophy

As I have suggested, the significant point of connection between the thinking of Levinas and this thesis lies in his engagement with the relationship between the Self - the subject - and the Other. It would be reasonable to assume that the experience of living through the era of the Holocaust influenced Levinas's thinking and fed his concern for justice for the Other, the one totalised, absorbed, the one who disappears both under totalitarian regimes, and, to his way of thinking, in traditional philosophical discourse. In his first major work, *Totality and Infinity*, Levinas pointed

to the concern of the philosophical tradition as being with ontology, with the primacy of Being, as allowing the 'I' to colonise the other, simply in the process of being. He saw the ontological event that had defined and dominated the philosophical tradition as one which suppressed or reduced all forms of otherness by transforming their very alterity into the Same (see Critchley, 1992:5-6).

Central to his work was a concern that Western philosophy had been pre-occupied with Being at the expense of what he termed 'otherwise than Being', with what lies outside the totality of Being, that which might be called transcendent, exterior, infinite, alterity, the Other. Put simply by Colin Davis at the beginning of his book *Levinas: An Introduction,* 'The thought of Emmanuel Levinas is governed by one simple yet far-reaching idea: Western philosophy has consistently practised a suppression of the Other' (Davis, 1996:1).

Levinas's philosophical project in the period following the publication of *Totality and Infinity*, is summarised in his 1962 paper 'Transcendence and Height' In this paper Levinas outlines and criticizes what he understands as this traditional, 'digestive' philosophy (see Critchley, 1992:6). For Levinas, the Same is *par excellence* the knowing ego, what he calls the 'melting pot (*le creuset*) of Being' (Levinas, 1962:89, in Critchley, 1992:6). 'The ego is the site for the transmutation of otherness', (Critchley, 1992:6) and it was such a reduction of the Other to the Same that Levinas resisted, a resistance which led to his construal of ethics as something other than ontological.

With his concern for the totalising nature of philosophy per se, Levinas's understanding of 'ethics' was distinctive. As Davis says, 'Ethics, in his use of the term, is neither a code of rules nor the study of reasoning about how we ought to act' (Davis, 1996:35).The word éthique was first used in original preface to 1961 edition of *Totality and Infinity* and Levinas expands on his understanding thus:

> A calling into question [*mise en question*] of the Same – which cannot occur [*se faire*] within the egoistic spontaneity of the Same – is brought about [*se fait*] by the Other [*l'Autre*]. We name this calling into question of my spontaneity by the presence of the Other [*Autrui*] *ethics.* The strangeness of

> the Other, his irreducibility to the I [*Moi*], to my thoughts and my possessions, is precisely accomplished [*s'accomplit*] as a calling into question of my spontaneity, as *ethics*. Metaphysics, transcendence, the welcoming of the Other by the Same, of the Other by Me, is concretely produced [*se produit*] as the calling into question of the Same by the Other, that is, as the *ethics* that accomplishes the critical essence of knowledge (Levinas, 1969:43 emphasis added, in Davis, 1996:36).

So, for Levinas, 'ethics occurs as the putting into question of the ego, the knowing subject, self-consciousness, or whatever Levinas, following Plato calls the Same, by the Other' (Critchley, 1992:4). He returns to this theme time and time again in his work. Derrida famously describes this persistent engagement with this idea as crashing of a wave on a beach, always the same wave returning and repeating its movement with deeper insistence (see Derrida, 1978:312 in Critchley, 1992:4).

There are, however, obvious difficulties involved in going beyond, outside, the philosophical tradition. In his introduction to the work of Levinas, Davis outlines the problem that Levinas struggled with in his two major works (as well as many others): the need to find ways of maintaining the separation ontology and ethics, when the 'philosophical tools at his disposal derived from a tradition which regarded ethical enquiry as dependent upon ontological insights' (Davis, 1996:35).

With Levinas's interest focused on the relationship of the Self and Other, he engaged with the question of the nature of the Other and how this might be experienced by the Same. He first introduced the concept of *absolute alterity* in his works, *Existence and Existents* and *Time and the Other*. These texts suggest that the alterity of the other or as Levinas also expresses it, the other's 'exteriority', is 'not simply an effect of space, which keeps separate what is conceptually identical' nor is the other only an *alter ego* since then the relationship between subjects would be the 'indifferent and reciprocal relationship of two interchangeable terms' (Levinas, 1978:95 in Perpich, 2005:106). As Diane Perpich says,

> The relationship to the other is an *asymmetrical* relationship that cannot be made reciprocal or symmetrical because the other's alterity is not a relative

> quality but rather the very content of her being: "The Other as Other is not only an alter ego : the Other is what I myself am not. The Other is this not because of the Other's character or physiognomy or psychology but because of the Other's very alterity" (Levinas,1987a:83). The other "bears alterity as an essence" (Levinas 1987a:87-88) (Perpich, 2005:106).

Therefore, a non-ontological philosophy (Levinas's 'ethics' which according to him, is first philosophy) would be characterised by resistance of the Other to the Same, and this Other would be characterised by his/her absolute alterity from the Self/Same.

The Face

In a compelling and some would say, poetic move, this exterior to being is named 'face' (*visage*) by Levinas, and is described by him as 'the way in which the other [*l'Autre*] presents himself, exceeding the *idea of the other in me'* (Levinas, 1969:50). Understood in this way, the face becomes the condition of possibility for ethics, since for Levinas,

> ... the ethical relation – and ethics is simply and entirely the event of this relation - is one in which I am related to the face of the Other (*le visage d'autrui*), where the French word *autrui'* refers to the other human being, whom I cannot evade, comprehend, or kill and before whom I am called to justice, to justify myself (Critchley, 1992:5).

In his 1952 essay 'Ethics in Spirit' Levinas identifies understanding of a thing with its possession (see Levinas, 1990:8, in Perpich, 2005:108) Although it can be treated as an object, in Levinas's terms the face offers an 'absolute resistance to possession' in 'presenting itself somehow in a personal way'. (8) 'To see a face is already to hear, "You shall not kill" (8). Further, in 'Freedom and Command' 1953: Levinas describes the face as 'the fact that a reality is opposed to me'. (Levinas 1987b:19, in Perpich 2005:108) It is a 'direct relationship' with 'a being becoming naked, an unqualified substance breaking through its form and presenting a face' (Levinas 1987b:20, in Perpich 2005:109). This is possible 'only as an ethical relationship' (21) because the other who is addressed or invoked in discourse 'is not invoked as a concept but as a

person'. This other 'is a being situated beyond every attribute which would have as its effect to qualify him, that is reduce him to what he has in common with other beings, to make him a concept.'(Levinas 1987b:41, in Perpich 2005:109)

In the many cultures where women's faces are the sites of others' oppressive idealisations, and become the contested ground for the cosmetics super-industry, or are seen as needing to be veiled, Levinas's use of the motif of 'face' (while acknowledging that it is non-representational) as that which encompasses unique personhood and summons respect, disrupts contemporary objectifying readings of the face and is refreshing. I do note however and will explore at the end of this chapter the nature of Levinas's identification of the 'feminine' with the Other and some of the issues that this raises.

It is clear that Levinas opposes any interpretation of the face that would take it as the signifier of a signified or as a mask dissimulating a real (see Levinas, 1987: 42, in Perpich, 2005:109).The assemblage of brow, eyes, nose, and mouth is said instead to indicate a self-presence, a 'hard and substantial interlocutor', a noumenal 'you' outside of every system or totality (Levinas 1987b: 41, in Perpich 2005:109). As Hand says of Levinas's understanding in this respect, 'Presence before the face is therefore an epiphany' (Hand, 1989:5). What Levinas means when he mentions the face of the Other is that I do not grasp the other in order to dominate; I respond, instead, to the face's epiphany. As Perpich says,

> The fundamental thesis broached through the notion of the face is the difference between the way in which things are given to consciousness (the order of ontology) and the way in which human beings are encountered (the order of ethics) (Perpich, 2005:103).

As Levinas asserts in *Totality and Infinity*, 'The face is present in its refusal to be contained. In this sense it cannot be comprehended, that is, encompassed. It is neither seen nor touched – for in visual or tactile sensation the identity of the I envelops the alterity of the object which becomes precisely a content' (Levinas, 1969:194).

Levinas never says that human beings cannot be known or that they are not given to consciousness in the same way as things. His claim is that, unlike things, they cannot be *reduced* to this given-ness (see Perpich, 2005:120n1). Perpich expresses it 'Rhetorically, the face is an image that represents the inadequacy of every image for representing alterity ... it represents the impossibility of its own representation' (Perpich, 2005:103).

The singularity of the Other

Thus Levinas insists that the other person is not like an object to us, known through concepts, but rather is in relationship, in society, with us. The other person is a being who faces us and as a unique being institutes an ethical relationship that lies somewhere beyond or outside an interaction of power and possession.

Levinas uses the term 'singularity' to describe an important element of this relationship and goes on to identify two aspects of singularity, irreducibility and ethical standing in his 1951 essay ' Is Ontology Fundamental?' (Perpich 2005:108) By irreducibility he understands that the human being is a unique and irreplaceable being. He or she cannot be 'reduced' to any of the attributes that could be used to describe them since that would reduce her or him to what she/he has in common with others. As irreducible, the other has unequivocal ethical standing. In other words, for Levinas, each singular being has moral worth and dignity not because of some shared universal property, but simply by dint of their existence. (see Perpich 2005:107) As Levinas says,

> Our relationship with the other certainly consists in wanting to comprehend him, but this relation overflows comprehension. Not only because knowledge of the other requires, outside of all curiosity, also sympathy or love, ways of being distinct from impassable contemplation, but because in our relation with the other, he does not affect us in terms of a concept. *He is a being and counts as such* (Levinas, 1996:6 in Perpich, 2005:108, italics added in article).

As will become evident on examining Derrida's response to Levinas's thinking on absolute alterity, there are difficulties with this understanding of absolute alterity and

the singularity of the other. The main problem is that there is no way to '*say* or *state* the singularity of the other without thereby rendering it an abstract, universalizable property' (Perpich, 2005:105). Obviously language is necessary for the 'face' to appear, to be able to think or talk about it the face must be able to be signified in some fashion within language. However, as Perpich says, 'the *singularity* "represented" by the face cannot appear in language as such; it appears only at the price of losing or foregoing its singularity' (Perpich, 2005:105).

This challenge expresses the fundamental tension that structures Levinas's conception of ethics – singularity must be said and cannot be said. Levinas would say that there is 'a moment in language that "testifies" all the same to the singularity for which it can find no proper evidence' (Perpich, 2005:109-110). As he claims in 'Is Ontology Fundamental' 'To comprehend a person is already to speak with him' (6) and in speech 'in comprehending [the other person] I simultaneously tell this comprehension to this being' (7). Thus '... the other (autrui) is not an object of comprehension first and an interlocutor second. The two relations are intertwined. In other words the comprehension of the other (autrui) is inseparable from his invocation.' (6)

I go on to explore these issues further as I review Levinas's later thinking on the ethical in language, but first I engage with Levinas's response to the continuation of violence, and question of whether his understanding of ethics is 'useful', in the face of the ubiquitous violence against women which is my over-ridding concern.

If there is obligation to the Other, why does violence still happen?

One question raised by Levinas's assertion that the 'face' of the other imposes an obligation not to kill, is, if this is the case, why does interpersonal violence continue? This is a particularly pertinent question when concerned with the field of gender-specific violence which appears to be committed against those who have so often been defined as Other by culture. Roger Burggraeve has explored this question of the

continuation of violence in his paper 'Violence and the Vulnerable Face of the Other : The Vision of Emmanuel Levinas on Moral Evil and Our Responsibility' [49]

Burggraeve notes Levinas' recognition that the totalising effect is implicated in the very process of being and how this is called into question by 'the face' of the Other.

> In my self-sufficient effort of existing, which on the ground of perception and representation aims to become the expression and realization of individual freedom, I am not merely limited from the outside but at my deepest – in the very principle of freedom – shocked and placed in question " Do I not kill by being" (Levinas, 1982:129, in Burggraeve, 1999:31).

Burggraeve allows that it is obviously a possibility that violence happens to the other, that the one who summons me can be killed. He claims that the ethical appeal that is born from/borne by the face is not an ontological or natural *necessity*.

> The "must" that asserts itself in the face – and by which the face is precisely a face – is not the "cannot be otherwise" of natural necessity, but to the contrary a "can be otherwise", that on the other hand, must not (Burggraeve, 1999:31).

Burggraeve, points out that in this respect, the ethical "must" is absolutely opposed to "compulsion" or "inevitability"- for it would otherwise be totalising of itself.

> The 'face' as command does not force compliance but only asks and appeals. It carries an authority that requires only by beseeching. 'The authority that reaches me from the face as a prohibition against murder is an "unarmed authority" (Levinas, 1988:69) that can call only upon my free, good will for help (Burggraeve, 1999:31).

It is apparent that violence in this 'face to face' encounter remains a continuous enchantment and a real possibility and the 'I' confronted with the vulnerability of the face must exert restraint, pull back, not do the other violence. This is a restraint

[49] I draw attention to the fact that Burggraeve's references to Levinas's work in this article are to French editions.

'which in fact runs counter to the spontaneous dynamics of my effort of existing that presses brutally forward [like a force that goes]' (Burggraeve, 1999:32).

According to Levinas there is at work in the effort of existing itself, in what he calls the Same, a scruple through which the being of the 'I' reveals itself also "otherwise than being". He speaks of "the Other *in* the Same" (Levinas 1974:141 in Burggraeve, 1999:32). This understanding resonates with Kristeva's thinking on ethics that I reviewed in the last chapter. As Burggraeve concludes, 'In this way, the effort of existing is in itself also already marked and touched by the good, not as necessity but as possibility and call' (Burggraeve, 1999:33). Levinas cites this as

> ..*le miracle de l'humaine* [the miracle of the human]; the other in the same, transcendence in immanence, the extraordinary in the ordinary, the other that affects the same and unsettles it, or more forcefully, throws it into such disorder that the effort of existing is turned inside out and exposed as vulnerable to the other than itself, which is to say the face of the other (Levinas, 1995:141-43, in Burggraeve, 1999:33).

This restraint opens the way for a positive movement of responsibility for the other.

> This responsibility which establishes the nonkilling of the other and which begins as from the summons of the face...Levinas characterizes...as "goodness" (Burggraeve, 1999:34).

This is goodness which is not neutral indifference, and it is goodness that is also asymmetrical (as Levinas sees the ethical relationship to be) and that thus in no way takes as a precondition for goodness any reward from the other. As Burggraeve understands it, 'for Levinas this "fear for the other pursued and stricken by death" is the foundation and even modality of responsibility-to-and-for-the-other as goodness' (Levinas, 1982:128 in Burggraeve, 1999:34).

Burggraeve asks if Levinas's advocacy of goodness here is not, in fact, a cheap and naïve philosophy. His response to his own question is that it is the presence and ongoing effect of evil in the world resulting in killing and oppression that allows such

a call to ethical behaviour (see Burggraeve 1999:35). For Burggraeve, 'Only when we have understood goodness as the overcoming of our "quasi-natural" self-interest, that on the basis of our neediness, seems rather more self evident than does 'being for the other', can its true revolutionary and counterintuitive character emerge' (Burggraeve 1999:35). For him the real meaning and value of goodness consists in overcoming the evil threatening the other with reduction and destruction, and instead establishing instead a relation of a different order with him or her, one resting on attention and devotion to the Other (see Burggraeve 1999:35).

In this sense, as Burggraeve interprets it,

> ... the Levinasian idea of responsibility for the other can never be thought of or explained without also pointing to its counterpart, its negative inverse, which it resists, namely the evil of reducing the face of the other person to his countenance, which is also to say indifference before, or rejection of the other, ... the alterity of the other person. (see Levinas 1996:78, in Burggraeve, 1999:35).

He concludes by claiming that by basing everything on the ethical call to the good, Levinas makes clear that abuse, violence and racist exclusion and elimination of the other are constantly possible and can never be definitively overcome. He says

> In ethics there is no eschatology, in the sense of a guaranteed "better world" or "world without evil". There is only the "good will" that must always prove itself in a choice against evil that is neither evident nor easy. Only in this way can there be a good future and justice for the other: only through ethical vigilance with respect to all forms of violence, tyranny, hate, and racism, and a society that nurtures in both our upbringing and education a sensibility for the other as "stranger" (Burggraeve, 1999:42).

Burggraeve thus finds goodness to be an iron-strong ethical concept. He goes on to detail Levinas's response to various specific categories of moral evil that entail the domination or misuse of the Other: tyranny, murder, hate and racism.

In response to these Levinas appears to put his faith in "the wisdom of love" which, according to Burggraeve he sees as a commandment 'descending on me from "elsewhere", from the alien, irreducible face of the other, questioning the "invested" and developed personality in which I "feel comfortably myself" and am able to function well, turning me upside down in order to abandon myself for the other' (Burggraeve 1999:42).

Once again it is apparent that the irreducible absolute alterity of the other is at the heart of Levinas's thinking

> Obeying the appeal that goes out from the face, means not reducing the other to his countenance, but rather doing absolutely conscientious justice to his infinitely irreducible absolute alterity (Burggraeve, 1999:42).

The basic ethical posture, one of justice, lies in opening oneself to the other and doing right by his otherness. As Burggraeve concludes, 'For Levinas the "face" is precisely that which radically and infinitely exceeds the "countenance" not as inaccessible but as exceptionally vulnerable. It is this vulnerability that exposes the ethical meaning of the face the simultaneous temptation to violence and the prohibition "Thou shalt not kill"' (Burggraeve, 1999:43).

As one with a concern to see an end to violence against women, I find it hard not to keep returning to material, concrete examples, and seeking stronger guarantees of the prohibition "Thou Shalt not Kill". Yet, as my engagement with Coetzee's work will highlight Levinas's insistence on maintaining the absolute alterity of the Other is perhaps the essence of 'goodness' and 'love'. Much hinges on our ability to sustain such absolute alterity and yet to maintain a meaningful contact across the abyss that that entails between Self and Other. With this in mind I turn to Levinas's later work beginning with Derrida's response to *Totality and Infinity*.

Derrida's challenge

Derrida responded to *Totality and Infinity* in a lengthy essay,' Violence and Metaphysics' which has been described as not so much a critique, as an early exercise

in Derridean deconstruction (see Eaglestone, 1997:131). Robert Eaglestone in his book *Ethical Criticism: Reading After Levinas,* in which he seeks a basis for ethical criticism in literature, suggest that Levinas went on to write his second major work, *Otherwise than Being,* in large part, in response to issues raised by Derrida in 'Violence and Metaphysics' (see Eaglestone, 1997: 130-131).

Derrida says in this essay, that Levinas, in *Totality and Infinity,* as we have noted, tried to liberate his thought from Greek philosophy, and attempted to re-establish ethics and metaphysics in the transcendence of a 'non-violent relationship to the infinite as infinitely other' (Derrida, 1978:83).At the heart of Derrida's essay is the question of how the rupture of a totality, of a system of thought, based on the transcendence of the face beyond language, can possibly be represented or have any meaning, in language. This is a problem particularly because the language of philosophy itself functions to repress just such ruptures. For Derrida, Levinas's thought

> ... can make us tremble' (Derrida, 1978:82) as it tries to liberate itself from Greek philosophy and attempts to re-establish ethics and metaphysics in the transcendence of 'a non-violent relationship to the infinite as infinitely other' (Derrida, 1978:83 in Eaglestone, 1997:131).

The question put to Levinas by Derrida here, one that has already been alluded to, is in what sense can we think or represent absolute alterity if, strictly speaking, it is un-thinkable and unrepresentable? If we can speak about it then it is not absolutely other as Levinas says it is. Derrida does, however, note that even if one cannot thematize the other, 'this impossibility and this imperative can themselves be thematized' (Derrida, 1978:123 in Perpich, 2005:104).[50]

Thus Derrida's principal concern from his reading of *Totality and Infinity* appears to be with problems of representation. In *Totality and Infinity,* Levinas assumes that his account, his representation of the 'true representation' of the face is able to go beyond the limits which are both from language and put upon language. He continually insists

[50] Such thematisation of the impossibility of representing the totally Other will be seen in the work of Coetzee.

that the face is not a representation yet he 'represents in written language the face which is representing itself without a way to be represented' (Eaglestone, 1997:132). Eaglestone highlights Derrida's questioning of how the other can appear without appearing 'as 'other' in me, as part of me, without appearing as the same. ... The other cannot be other if it is perceived through the same and if it not perceived through the same it cannot appear at all' (Eaglestone, 1997:133). Derrida's perception that ethics cannot exist except in language and that for him language or textuality is first philosophy, appears to have a formative effect on Levinas's thinking as expressed in his subsequent work, *Otherwise than Being* (see Eaglestone, 1997:135).

Levinas's linguistic turn

For Levinas's friend, Blanchot, *Otherwise than Being* represents a wholly new philosophical path. He notes the dedication at the start of the text of *Otherwise than Being* to the victims of the Holocaust and 'millions on millions of all confessions and all nations, victims of the same hatred of the other man, the same anti-Semitism', and asks, following Adorno, 'how can one philosophize?'

> ... how can one write within the memory of Auschwitz of those who have said, oftentimes in notes buried near the crematoria: know what has happened, don't forget, and at the same time you won't be able to.. It is this thought that traverses, that bears, the whole of Levinas' philosophy (Blanchot, 1986:50 in Eaglestone, 1997:137).

Having been profoundly personally affected by the Holocaust, it appears that in *Otherwise than Being* Levinas attempts to 'use the language of philosophy to show the limits of philosophy and to go beyond or 'outside' them, to speak in 'other words', to try to reshape philosophy after the Holocaust' (Eaglestone, 1997:137).

Although turning to its manifestation in language, in *Otherwise than Being*, Levinas in still as concerned with ethics as he was in *Totality and Infinity;* with the priority of the ethical, of obligation and sees that '...the self is through and through a hostage, older than the ego, prior to principles'(Levinas, 1981:117, in Eaglestone 1997:137). By using the word 'hostage' here Levinas continues with his theme of each of us

being always already responsible for the other/others. It is crucially the very otherness, the absolute alterity of each and every other, that imposes this duty on us. One of Levinas's favourite expressions of this is to quote from Dostoyevsky, words spoken by Alyosha Karamazov in *The Brothers Karamazov* 'We are all responsible for everyone else - but I am more responsible than all the others'. We are according to Levinas fundamentally responsible for others before we can in any way theorize this relationship. 'The otherwise than being, the totally other comes before our being. Our unconditional responsibility is not something that we take on or a rule by which we agree to be bound: instead it exists before us and we are 'thrown' into it, without any choice' (Eaglestone, 1997:138).

Most significantly for my exploration, while maintaining this understanding of the obligation that the existence of the other imposes, in *Otherwise than Being* Levinas takes a linguistic turn, and explores the way in which language interrupts itself, though again we note that this is complex since in doing so Levinas still cannot get outside philosophical discourse. As Eaglestone claims,

> *Otherwise than Being* is about the interruption of philosophical language and ...all other sorts of discourse, by what is beyond being, what is otherwise ... it is this 'interruption' that allows the reformulation of ethics in the light of the problems of representation in *Totality and Infinity*' (Eaglestone, 1997:138).

A distinctive characteristic of *Otherwise than Being* is that in style and form, it performs the *interruption* of discourse that it analyses.[51] Much of it is in interrogative form. Obviously, an idea phrased as a question opens the discourse to various possible responses, making further questions a possibility. This is one way the form of the work acts as an interruption of the discourse.

Otherwise than Being also uses the performative technique of offering similar ideas over and over again with different names. For example, ' 'substitution' becomes 'one-for-the-other' becomes 'hostage, becomes 'sacrifice', becomes 'exposure', becomes 'passivity beyond passivity' becomes 'proximity' becomes trauma, becomes 'here-I-

[51] My subsequent discussion of the work of Coetzee will in part highlight the function of form in literature.

am', (...) but not in any ordered developmental sequence' (Eaglestone, 1997:139). These writing tactics make it impossible to offer simple and limiting definitions of terms and therefore the work becomes poetic in its excess of meaning.

This understanding of interruption, both emphasised and demonstrated performatively by Levinas's style in *Otherwise than Being,* is made possible by a new understanding on his part of the significance of language. *Otherwise than Being* concentrates on the metaphor, the excess of meaning that the metaphor allows and so seeks the *beyond* of language (see Eaglestone 1997:139).

Key to Levinas's discussion here is an understanding of language as amphibology. Amphibology is defined as a 'sentence which may be construed in two distinct senses' (OED) This is not one meaning that is ambiguous or equivocal but two different and simultaneous meanings (see Eaglestone 1997:140). In *Otherwise than Being,* Levinas contends that the nature of language is amphibological because it is made up of the transcendent **Saying** (le dire) and the immanent **Said** (le dit). According to Levinas at this stage of this writing, it is the interweaving of the two which allows the ethical to signify 'within ontological language' (Critchley, 1992:7).

The Saying and the Said

The Saying

According to Eaglestone, "The saying is the focus of *Otherwise than Being* ... It is not a statement of any sort, nor can it be thematized or defined and delimited' (Eaglestone, 1997:141). In keeping with the distinctive style I have noted in *Otherwise than Being,* Levinas redescribes Saying in many different ways with slightly different but complementary emphasis each time. Thus, the Saying is a metaphor for the unsayable (see Eaglestone, 1997:141). It is a 'performative doing that cannot be reduced to a constative description' (Critchley, 1992:7). Other definitions include, it is the '(non)place' where what might be called 'the ethical event' occurs, the 'founding' event which Levinas hopes to uncover, and which in *Totality and Infinity* was thought to take place in the face-to-face relation' (Eaglestone, 1997:142).

Another distinction that aids an understanding of the Saying is that of invocation or address. Perpich describes Levinas's understanding of language as consisting not only in 'a system of signs in the service of pre-existing thought' (Levinas, 1990:9) but also as involving a dimension of invocation and address (see Perpich, 2001:34). For Perpich, it is the concepts of the Saying and the Said in Levinas's later work which capture the two aspects of language, invocation and representation, respectively. In *Totality and Infinity* this terminology is briefly foreshadowed, but has not yet fully emerged. However, both there and in the 1951 essay "Is Ontology Fundamental?" Levinas distinguishes the *function* of language as an invocation of the Other from the *role* of language in representation or understanding (see Perpich, 2001:34)

Perpich identifies that a central concern of the essay 'Is Ontology Fundamental' is 'to isolate the *moment of invocation* and to show its irreducibility to comprehension and knowledge' (Perpich, 2001:34). According to Perpich, Levinas argues that to invoke the Other is not to address a representation or concept of the Other but the person him-or herself (see Perpich, 2001:34). She says that the relationship has

> an unmediated quality, which renders it qualitatively different from our relations to things. Levinas in fact argues that every comprehension of the Other is simultaneously addressed to the Other. Every word that bears on the Other as a theme is also a word spoken to the Other (Perpich, 2001:34-35).

As already alluded to, in *Totality and Infinity*, invocation represents the possibility of a relation in which neither the ego nor the Other is absorbed or negated, in which, these terms remain "separate" or "absolute" within the relationship (Levinas, 1969:195). As Perpich states,

> Thus alongside the thematization that occurs in language, there is a moment that is unthematized and in principle unthematizable. Even when the Other is explicitly our theme, the language in which the theme is formulated repeats the gesture of invocation and address. It refers beyond itself to the Other (Perpich, 2001:35).

This then is Levinas's linguistic turn. Before this, most thoroughly in *Totality and Infinity*, he understood the ethical to be made manifest through the face to face relationship, now, in *Otherwise than Being* the ethical is manifest in language. 'The approach to the other, substitution and responsibility for the other - all terms that are effectively synonymous with ethics for Levinas - are made apparent, enacted in language. 'Language is no longer simply the expression of my unique response to the other, *but is the very condition or possibility of all ethics in general*'' (Eaglestone, 1997:140, emphasis added).

Again, as Critchley has it,

> The Saying is my exposure – corporal, sensible – to the Other, my inability to refuse the Other's approach. It is the performative stating, proposing or expressive position of myself facing the Other. It is a verbal or non-verbal ethical performance, whose essence cannot be caught in constative propositions. It is a performative *doing* that cannot be reduced to a constative description.
>
> The Saying is the sheer radicality of human speaking, of the event of being in relation with an Other; it is the non-thematizable ethical residue (Levinas 1981:18) of language that escapes comprehension, interrupts philosophy and is the very enactment of the ethical movement from the Same to the Other (Critchley, 1992:7).

The Said

By contrast the other element of Levinas's model of language, the Said, is a 'statement, assertion or proposition (...) concerning which the truth or falsity can be ascertained' (Critchley, 1992:7). Traditional philosophy, ontology, speaks the propositional language of the Said. The content of a person's words, their identifiable meaning, is the Said.

In Levinas's exposition, 'the Said is the Saying incarnated into a concrete world of meanings and history, and it has an inescapable hold over the Saying immobilising it.' (Levinas, 1981:5) The Said has such a hold 'because it *designates*, and in designation, denies the transcendence of the Saying' (Levinas, 1981:23 in Eaglestone, 1997: 145).

The Said is the material of language; as Levinas frames it 'a system of nouns identifying entities ... designating entities ... But also as the verb in a predictive proposition in which the substances break down into modes of being, modes of temporalizations' (Levinas, 1981:40 in Eaglestone, 1997:145). The Said names and maps the boundaries of the world. In Levinas's terminology, the Said creates the identity of an entity by 'thematising' it.

> ..every one is named, delimited and identified as a person, one of a genus of 'people' and thus reduced into just one of a thing in a category.(The saying, disrupts this genus: 'the other is a neighbour...before being an individuation of the genus man' (Levinas, 1981:59) (Eaglestone, 1997:145).

The Said, fits the subject into a category, '...imposes on the subject a totalising teleological narrative of identity and consciousness' (Eaglestone, 1997:146). [52]

How is the Saying to be Said?

And this is where a problem emerges in the use of this double metaphor for Levinas of the Saying and the Said, a problem which is similar to that of how to represent 'the face' without appropriating it How is the Saying, which is my non-totalising vulnerable exposure to the Other, to be Said in traditional philosophical language and not be betrayed? How is the ethical Saying that carries the address to the other and respect for their absolute otherness, to be thematised, and remain true to itself? (see Critchley, 1992:7-8).

As Eaglestone perceives it, the Saying, in Levinas's understanding of it

[52] See my discussion of the totalising effect of narrative in Chapter Two

> breaks up identity and opens to the other because it is in the saying that the finite and limiting structures of being, of essence, of identity, of standing alone, are overcome. The saying overcomes the closure of identity because it comes before identity (Eaglestone, 1997:143).

This 'break up of essence' (Levinas, 1981:14) allows an approach to the other because the unifying exclusive 'one' is fractured'. In Eaglestone's evocative phrase, 'Dasein can no longer stand alone overlooking the world: rather it is aware of always already being obligated' (Eaglestone, 1997:143). The saying leads to the 'unblocking' of communication. It is not due to the contents that are inscribed in the said and transmitted to the interpretation and decoding done by the other. It is in the 'risky uncovering of oneself, in sincerity, the breaking up of inwardness and the abandon of all shelter, exposure to traumas, vulnerability' (Levinas, 1981:48).

It is the idea of substitution, of the self for the other, that forms the kernel of *Otherwise than Being* (Levinas, 1981:193-4 fn1) and it emerges in the Saying. 'Substitution, at the limit of being, ends up in saying, in the giving of signs, giving a sign of this giving of signs, expressing oneself' (Levinas, 1981:15). As Levinas explains it,

> Responsibility goes beyond being. In sincerity, in frankness, in the veracity of this saying, in the uncoveredness of suffering, being is altered. But this saying remains, in its activity, a passivity, more passive than all passivity, for it is a sacrifice without reserve, without holding back, and in this non-voluntary – the sacrifice of a hostage designated who has not chosen himself to be a hostage. (Levinas, 1981:15)

'The saying' says Levinas, 'is the moment of committing oneself to the other, a moment which has already been (and is not in fact a moment) but a continual process of substitution. The Saying embodies the passivity to which 'I' the ego, is reduced in proximity to the Other' (Levinas, 1981:92 in Eaglestone, 1997:144). Levinas illustrates this proximity as being at the point when asked a question, when sheltering in a doorway in the rain with a stranger, you are passive – a 'hostage ' – before you are able to choose whether to respond or not, and any response positive or negative,

will be a response. The Saying thus makes 'oneself a sign' (see Levinas, 1981:143). The Saying is the impossibility of denying the other; it is the site of our responsibility for the other. As Levinas writes, '...the responsibility for another is precisely a saying prior to anything said'(Levinas, 1981:43).

To convey his understanding of this process of asymmetrical responsibility, Levinas obviously employs superlatives and hyperbole when he attempts to express the all-surpassing character of transcendence. This is his attempt to say the unsayable Saying, which is unsayable because it is interwoven with the Said (see Eaglestone, 1997:144).

Derrida has made the point in 'Violence and Metaphysics', that language as a system is always already violent: it cannot get us to announce the 'unthinkable-impossible-unutterable beyond [tradition's] Being and Logos' (Derrida, 1978:114 in Eaglestone, 1997:132).The other's otherness is always the victim of the violence of language. 'Language as system, cannot escape violence, which is the necessary condition of the institution of any system' (Eaglestone, 1997: 132).

Likewise in Levinas's exposition we may sense a struggle between the Saying and the Said. The Saying, un-thematisable, becomes trapped in the Said, in the *logos.* The Saying and the Said exist in continual tension, the Said does violence in containing the Saying and the Saying interrupts the Said (Eaglestone, 1997:147). The Saying is 'incarnated' in language and made manifest, yet at a cost. The manifestation of the Saying, which as we remember is the condition of ethics, demands

> a subordination of the saying to the said, to the linguistic system and to ontology...In language qua said everything is conveyed before us, be it at the price of a betrayal...Language permits us to utter, be it by betrayal, this *outside of being,* this exception to being, as though being's other were an event of being. (Levinas, 1981:6 in Eaglestone 1997:147).

The Saying appears only as a betrayal of itself 'a saying teleologically turned to the kerygma of the said' (Levinas, 1981:37). In this process, the Saying is transformed to such an extent that it is 'forgotten' (Levinas, 1981:37) in the Said. However, according to Levinas, the Saying is never completely engulfed in the Said. The Saying

is manifest in its disruption of the Said. As Eaglestone expresses it 'The Saying both stimulates the Said – is made manifest in the Said – and ruptures it' (Eaglestone 1997:147). It is 'an affirmation and a retraction of the said' (Levinas, 1981:44) In the Said 'the spirit hears the echo of the *otherwise'* (Levinas, 1981:44). The significance of 'the saying that is absorbed in the said is not exhausted' (Levinas, 1981:47). 'Rather it imprints its *trace* on the thematization itself' (Levinas, 1981:46-47 emphasis added, in Eaglestone 1997:147).

In his book *Ethical Criticism,* Eaglestone tries to convey this dual nature of language by reference to the well known song, "What a Wonderful World", which has a line "I see friends shaking hands saying 'How do you do" – they're really saying "I love you." Here, the shaking hands saying "How do you do" is understood as the Said of the song and the "I love you", the Saying (see Eaglestone, 1997:147).

Levinas argues that it is the task of philosophy to uncover the Saying, extracting 'the otherwise than being' from the Said (Levinas, 1981:7). He notes that '...as soon as the otherwise than being is described 'it is betrayed in the said that dominates the saying which states it' (Levinas, 1981:7), but 'philosophy is called upon to reduce that betrayal' (Levinas, 1981: 156).This 'reduction' is the way Levinas aims to uncover the Saying in the Said.

Reduction

Again, Levinas does not define this term reduction as such. In *Otherwise than Being* Levinas explores ways in which the Said can be unsaid or reduced thereby letting the Saying reside as a residue, or interruption within the Said (see Levinas, 1981:7). As has been noted, in this work, he does this by modelling a performative disruption of the language of ontology.

Whereas in *Totality and Infinity,* Levinas *writes about* ethics, *Otherwise Than Being* is the performative enactment of ethical writing; 'a form of writing that with an explosion destroys all other books in the world'(Critchley, 1992:8). Of particular interest here with my previous exploration of the poetics of testimony and witness literature in view, is the understanding that one of Levinas's definitions of this

reduction of the Said to the Saying is close to the idea of 'prophecy' or 'witness' (Levinas, 1981: 149-153 in Eaglestone, 1997:149).

Responding to the use of a similar motif by Heidegger, Levinas uses a metaphor to clarify his meaning with regard to the relationship of the Saying to the Said. He writes of a piece of thread with knots along its length (see Levinas, 1981: 25, 105, 165-71). The thread, the Said, is interrupted with knots. They represent the interruption of the Saying: a knot is made of the thread, dependent on the thread and yet not the thread. In the same way the Saying can only be expressed through that which betrays it, the Said. A knot is the interruption, the Saying that disrupts the Said but is dependant on it. The task of philosophy for Levinas is not simply to follow the thread but rather to foreground those moments where the knots interrupt the thread, where the beyond being interrupts being, where the Saying interrupts the Said, to draw awareness to the ethical Saying entwined with the Said (see Eaglestone, 1997:151).

What is perpetually uncovered (and betrayed) in this foregrounding is not '...a platitude, not a poverty of the saying received in exchange for the infinite richness of the said (Levinas, 1981:184) but rather the 'caress of love...always different... [which] overflows with exorbitance the songs, poems and admissions in which it is said' (Levinas, 1981:184 in Eaglestone,1997:151-152).

Levinas and art

With Eaglestone, I would then say that this is what I am seeking, an unforgetting of the Saying, if the Saying *is* relations of mutual obligation and respect between others of whatever gender or race etc. My hope is that a trace (or traces) of this might be found in art, in particular in literature. Given the nature of *Otherwise than Being* as poetic and performative, we might suppose that Levinas would regard art and literature as revelatory of the transcendent and 'otherwise than being'. Unfortunately this appears to have been a subject on which he contradicted himself over time. His thinking on this appeared to change over the course of his writing although Robbins sees his varying stances on this issue, not as a progression of thinking over time, but rather as a tension operative within each of his texts that refer to art (see Robbins, 1999:75). For the most part his thinking in this respect developed in conversation with

Heidegger's thinking on the role of art.[53] Very briefly his early thinking as set out in an essay 'Reality and Its Shadow' was that art is obscure, and a form of non-truth, and this view is reinforced in *Totality and Infinity.* In short, for Levinas, in his early thinking art does not deal with real life but its resemblance: it is essentially disengaged, separate, an evasion, a disavowal of responsibility. Furthermore, there is something wicked and egoist and cowardly in artistic enjoyment. There are times when one can be ashamed of it, as of feasting during a plague. (see Levinas 1948 in Eaglestone,1997:109).[54]

It is clear, if Levinas's position on aesthetics, in his earlier writings and in *Totality and Infinity* is to be accepted, he finds no ethical 'meaning' in art works, only 'a dangerous and wicked distraction or swindle' (Eaglestone, 1997:124). Whether a painting, sculpture or written language, in its material 'density as a linguistic product', (Levinas, 1969:177) an art work is only matter and 'the revelation of matter is essentially superficial' (Levinas, 1969:192 in Eaglestone, 1997:124)

By the time he wrote *Otherwise than Being,* Levinas's position on art had shifted somewhat. Art no longer revealed a 'hither' shadow world ('Reality and Its Shadow') or an empty world (*Totality and Infinity*) but the Being or essence *of* the world. However such a revelation of the essence only reveals the said: it does not uncover the saying. Levinas still wrestles with the signification of works of art and particularly literary art works in this later book. As we have seen, he can write that 'the saying, as exorbitance can overflow the said in poetry and song', but he also presents a very different view of art, in which 'the saying appears to have no part' (Eaglestone, 1997:152).

For Levinas in his later work, art work is about revealing essence. An art work is said 'pure theme ...absolute exposition' (Levinas, 1981:40). Art works bring out and make clear their essence. This is a change of stance for Levinas who had argued that art as 'monstrous', 'alien' or 'cold splendor' did not and could not reveal being. In

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[53] See Eaglestone's detailed account of this in Eaglestone 1997:98-128, 152-163

[54] This is close to allegations that were levelled at Coetzee of being over aesthetic and concerned simply with the literary, while writing in the apartheid era in South Africa)

Otherwise than Being, Levinas accepts Heidegger's position; Art does reveal being (see Eaglestone, 1997:153).

Whilst in *Otherwise than Being* Levinas's view of art, especially in the form of literature, correlates neither with his concept of language nor with his concept of the task of philosophy and its relation to language, Eaglestone (1997:158-163) makes a case for Levinas's own writing in the book indicating that literary art must also be composed of the Saying and the Said. For Eaglestone three factors support this claim: Levinas's understanding of language, his use of and appeal to literature for illustration, and the text's own potential 'literary' status.

Thus there is a tension throughout the text of *Otherwise than Being,* in relation to how literary texts 'work'. For instance, Levinas says, the Saying

> is not a poverty of the saying received in exchange for the infinite richness of the said, fixed and admirably mobile, in our books and our traditions, our sciences and our poetry, our religions and our conversations, it is not a barter of the duped. The caress of love, always the same, in the last accounting (for him that thinks in counting) is always different and overflows with exorbitance the songs, poems and admissions in which it is said in so many different ways and through so many themes, in which it is apparently forgotten (Levinas, 1981:184).

Overflowing exorbitance is clearly understood to occur in art (in songs and poems) yet this contradicts Levinas's writing on the aesthetic in *Otherwise than Being* in which the caress of love, the Saying, cannot be achieved by art.

It is strange then that Levinas is not averse to using literary texts for illustration and as extra-textual authorities. For example, I have noted his reference to a passage from Dostoyevsky which reveals our responsibility to the other (Levinas, 1981:146). He also employs a phrase from Celan's poem 'In Praise of Remoteness', as an epigraph (I am you only if /I am I). Eaglestone argues that it would appear from Levinas's use of this poem that he must consider it capable of acting as a Saying to disrupt the *logos,* the Said. These literary texts, then, work as 'prophecy' fracturing the Said, and echo

the aim of Levinas's work in the discourse of philosophy. To be used in this way they must be more than just the Said resounding, foregrounding its own essence, which is what Levinas formerly thought art achieves. They must open to the other, demonstrating that they are Saying as well as Said (see Eaglestone, 1997:160-161).

Derrida thought that *Totality and Infinity* was a work of art rather than a treatise (Derrida, 1978:312 n7), and surely this could all the more readily be claimed for *Otherwise than Being* (as Blanchot did) which uses linguistic terms: saying, said, noun, verb, which exhibits amphibology, which emphasises breathing, exhalation and speech, which are also within the trope of language. Levinas's writing 'lays metaphor on dizzying metaphor', employs questions which open up discourse to interruption. It 'performs what the discourse discusses' (Eaglestone, 1997:161).

Thus it may be claimed that reading *Otherwise than Being* is closer to reading poetry than philosophy and as Eaglestone says '[t]his is not a linear work but a tapestry, weaving ideas and concerns together in shifting patterns. Only together, as a whole, does its significance become apparent' (Eaglestone, 1997:162). The literary style of *Otherwise than Being*, trying to interrupt its own discourse to break open the saying, is a pivotal part of its 'argument'. In it it is possible to detect echoes of literary writing, especially perhaps self-reflexive contemporary postmodern poetry and prose (see Eaglestone, 1997:162).

Having made a case for the Saying being interwoven with the Said in poetic language, we follow Levinas in his exploration of how the Saying interrupts discourse. The question the Saying asks, calling to our responsibility is unsayable. It can be spoken of, encrypted in language, 'only by an abuse of language' (Levinas, 1981:196). (We have seen that Celan is an outstanding example of the need to fracture and abuse language in order to unforget the Saying in poetry). 'Levinas's attempt to interrupt the *logos* in philosophical language in the name of the other can be transferred into an attempt to do the same in the discourse of literature and criticism' (Eaglestone 1997:165). In spite of his stated opposition to the aesthetic, this is suggested by formal tropes of *Otherwise than Being*. As Eaglestone summarizes it, capturing what is important for this thesis, in Levinas's complex writing on the Saying and the Said and

art, 'Literary discourse, too, is an abuse of language which can speak the unsayable' (Eaglestone, 1997:165).

While my main concern is to explore Levinas's understanding of the operation of language, and its enactment of interruption of discourse, I am also interested in the use he makes of the notion of the 'feminine'. This concept underwent development and change over the course of his writing. It appears to have been such as to have engendered in feminist critics both hope and despair.

Levinas and the Feminine

I find in Levinasian ethics an important valorisation of, and approach to difference. However, I also find myself trying to understand and account for the apparently sexist, patriarchal language in which his notion of 'the feminine', which is initially a key concept in his understanding of ethics, is expressed (see Perpich, 2001:29).

Part of the problem may lie with the 'position' Levinas writes from. Stella Sandford points out in her exploration of 'Levinas, Feminism and the Feminine' that his writing is from the perspective of a subject 'coded masculine or male' (Sandford, 2002:142).

An early and critical response to Levinas's characterisation of the 'feminine' takes up this point of the perspective of Levinas's writing and comes in a footnote in Simone de Beauvoir's *Second Sex* In this Beauvoir takes Levinas to task because he 'deliberately takes a man's point of view, disregarding the reciprocity of subject and object' (Beauvoir, 1989:xxii, in Chanter, 2001:2). She quotes a passage from Levinas's *Time and the Other,* in which he seems to endorse the notion of woman as other, and which in reinforcing traditional conceptions of women, appears to confirm Beauvoir's own understanding that woman 'is defined and differentiated with reference to man and not he with reference to her; she is the incidental, the inessential. He is the Subject, he is the Absolute – She is the Other' (Beauvoir 1989:xxii in Chanter, 2001:2).

It has been suggested that Beauvoir's interpretation of Levinas's position is not sufficiently nuanced and that his words should be understood in the context of his

overall philosophical project, which is, as I have outlined above, to champion the notion of alterity and see its preservation as essential in the face of the totalising effect of traditional philosophical and other dominant discourses. As Chanter claims, 'Levinas disrupts the priority of the whole, the one or the system on which our notions of complementarity, reciprocity and symmetry rest' (Chanter, 2001:2) and therefore sees no great merit in a model that advocates *reciprocal* relations between the sexes, which would in his terms be totalising. For Levinas 'the feminine' is the ultimate in alterity, and so 'the feminine plays a major part in the challenge he issues to a philosophical heritage that assumes the primacy of the same' (Chanter, 2001:3).

Another feminist writer of note who has engaged critically with Levinas's work is Luce Irigaray. One might suppose some common ground between the work of Irigaray and Levinas, with regard to the feminine. As Sandford points out, Irigaray has drawn attention to the fact that '[h]istorically the reduction of sexual difference has been the reduction of the *feminine* other to what Irigaray calls the 'masculine' economy of the same' (Sandford, 2002:143) This, for Irigaray, comes to us not through the use of neutral terms but is expressed in masculine language, such as the generic pronoun 'he' and the supposedly inclusive 'man' (see Sandford, 2002: 143). Sandford goes on,

> Within this economy the feminine other has not been thought in her alterity or feminine specificity *qua* feminine but only as the complementary and dependent opposite of the masculine, the not-masculine (Sandford, 2002:143-144)

Therefore there would seem to be a possible shared understanding in the thinking of Irigaray and Levinas in which,

> Levinas's most fundamental assertion that the other has not been thought *as* other, but only as the not–same, becomes Irigaray's fundamental assertion that the *feminine* other has not been thought as feminine other, but only as the not-masculine (Sandford, 2002:144).

As I have pointed out, Levinas's theorising of the 'feminine' changed over the course of his work. In *Existence and Existents*, Levinas insists on the dimension of sexual difference in eros. As Sandford claims 'In saying that it is in eros that the possibility of a radical thinking of transcendence arises, he says that it is in eros that the other is revealed *as* other. Furthermore he claims that eros reveals the other par excellence to be 'the feminine'... (Sandford 2002: 144).

The problem is that for many feminist readers, such as Irigaray, it becomes impossible to accept Levinas's use of the category of the feminine, since it is undermined by the descriptions in *Time and the Other* and *Totality and Infinity* of the role of the feminine in the 'ethical' economy that Levinas describes in his work (see Sandford, 2002:144-145).

In *Totality and Infinity*, for instance there is the description of an other who 'does not simply reveal itself as/in face but who simultaneously withdraws and is absent, a simultaneity called 'discretion'. This other is woman' (Sandford, 2002:146). As Levinas expresses it,

> And the other whose presence is discretely an absence, with which is accomplished the primary hospitable welcome which describes the field of intimacy is Woman. The woman is the condition for recollection, the interiority of the Home, and inhabitation (Levinas, 1969:171 in Sandford, 2002:146)

This face-to-face, for Levinas is *not* a relation that opens up the dimension of height, or transcendence the ethical relationship with which he is so concerned. As he expresses it, the feminine other who affords a welcome in the home is

> ..not the *You* [*le Vous*] of the face that reveals itself in a dimension of height, but precisely the *thou*[*le tu*] of familiarity: a language without teaching, a silent language, an understanding without words, an expression in secret. The I-Thou which Buber sees the category of interhuman relationship is the relation not with the interlocutor but with feminine alterity (Levinas, 1969:155 in Sandford, 2002: 146).

It is such texts that alert Irigaray to the danger in Levinas's work of women being characterised as replicas of men. She also sees other problems inherent in Levinas using the 'feminine' to represent alterity. As Chanter explains, Irigaray is wary of 'reinscribing the feminine as subordinate to men, in a Levinasian scenario that has women facilitate men's transcendence without achieving transcendence themselves' (Chanter, 2001:3).

In a lyrical commentary on Levinas's writing 'The Fecundity of the Caress' (in Chanter, 2001:119-144), Irigaray 'objects to Levinas's association of women with profanity, infancy, and animality, tropes that exclude women themselves from the ethical and religious transcendence achieved by men'(Chanter, 2001:20). She sees women as playing the role of men's double or shadow as they make possible a transcendence to which they are not given access (see Chanter, 2001:20). Irigaray writes, 'Whereas the male lover leads her back to the *not yet* of the child, the *never like him* of the animal – outside human destiny. Separating himself from her with this gesture, to return to his "ethical responsibilities"' (Irigaray, 2001:129) Thus she says, 'The beloved woman is relegated to an inwardness that is not one because it is abyssal, animal, infantile, prenuptial, while the lover is left a solitary call to his God' (Irigaray, 2001:132). And again, 'While he, the lover, is sent back to the transcendental, she the beloved is plunged into the depths' (Irigaray, 2001:121).

In a second essay 'Questions to Emmanuel Levinas', Irigaray speaks of the need for the woman to be a subject in love and not reducible to a more or less immediate object of desire. She writes, that the 'description of pleasure given by Levinas is unacceptable to the extent that it presents man as the sole subject exercising his desire and his appetite upon the woman who is deprived of subjectivity except to seduce him' (Irigaray, 1991:115).

Questions, thus, circle around the benefits and dangers of a model of reciprocity and whether, as it might be said Levinas does, we question the value of such a model in order to go beyond it, when it is not apparent that such reciprocity has yet been achieved and its benefits reaped. With a degree of scepticism Chanter wonders if Levinas's appeal to feminine alterity is just 'so much mystification' (Chanter,

2001:3). What might be taken as a far-sighted and radical move on the part of Levinas, still, in fact, seems to 'risk confining women to the role of mysterious other, as man's muse, not quite human, incapable of rational thought or responsible action' (Chanter, 2001:5-6). Chanter asks, 'Could it be that even his attempt to affirm radical alterity falls short of the very radicality that Levinas's philosophy announces?'(Chanter, 2001:6) She uses his own terms to ask whether the saying of 'the feminine' goes beyond the said of Levinas's philosophy' (Chanter, 2001:8).

With regard to the language that Levinas uses, Sandford is led to say that the 'frank and unselfconscious account of the nature and place of the feminine in *Totality and Infinity* is gratingly patriarchal' (Sandford, 2002:147), and she quotes the following passage in support of her judgement:

> The feminine essentially violable and inviolable, the 'Eternal Feminine', is the virgin or an incessant recommencement of virginity...The beloved [L'aimée] returned to the stage of infancy without responsibility – this coquettish head, this youth, this pure life 'a bit silly'[un peu bête] – has quit her status as a person... The relations with the [feminine] Other are enacted in play; one plays with the Other as with a young animal (Levinas, 1969:258-9 in Sandford, 2002:147).

The problem with language extends to Levinas's use of sexual metaphorics. An example given by Chanter is that the mastery of the subject who masters existence is described by Levinas in the language of 'virility', while death, and eros are characterised as 'encounters with alterity that constitute what could be called feminized moments' (Chanter, 2001:15). Levinas speaks of the feminine as a mode of withdrawal, as hiding , as modesty, and as slipping away from the light, and by these descriptions we are prepared for the sense in which 'the feminine' cannot be said to be a being. (see Chanter, 2001:15) And while, as the manifestation of alterity, the feminine is associated with a disruption of the ontology of being, for Levinas it cannot itself bring that disruption to fruition. 'Paternity is required to bring to completion the movement towards alterity that the feminine opens' (Chanter, 2001:16). In Levinas's lexicon 'the feminine' does not designate a being but is understood more as a 'tendency', a 'way' or a 'regime' (Chanter, 2001:16)

It has been said in Levinas's defence that 'the feminine' itself is a metaphor and is not intended to represent empirical women as such (see discussion in Sandford, 2002:154-156). While Levinas has been at pains to make clear that his accounts of 'the feminine' did not refer to women as such, he resorts to language that does evoke actual empirical women. Chanter claims that inferiority of women is marked in his texts, despite what are claimed to be his best intentions, and asks 'if there is no sense in which paternity, the father, and the son are accorded a certain priority, why are they marked in sexual (male) rather than neutral terms?(Chanter, 2001:16). She goes on, 'Even if the feminine designates a *tendency* and not a being and even if paternity and fecundity are taken to refer beyond the biological, the question remains of what significance these terms acquire' (Chanter, 2001:16-17). With the importance given to metaphor and the concept of the excess of meaning in his work, as Chanter says, 'the metaphorical overtones of the feminine cannot be trivialised' (Chanter, 2001:17). She goes on to suggest that,

> Ironic as it might seem, given that Levinas is known as the philosopher of the other, it is precisely his insistence upon the alterity of the other across the board and irrespective of identity, that renders him unable to take account of the fact that different subjects are situated differently from one another with regard to alterity. If we are all radically other, then the alterity of one other is in some sense indistinguishable from the alterity of all the rest (Chanter, 2001 20).

Chanter points out that this stance means that Levinas is unable to allow, for example, for the fact that women have traditionally been situated in roles where their devotion to others is often assumed whereas men have not. She does note in Levinas's defence that it might be seen as the function of politics not ethics to ensure equality

> ... perhaps by recognizing how individuals are specified differently by their relations to historical and cultural situations and traditions, but the question remains of whether Levinas's conception of ethics has not prejudged the ways in which alterity can be an issue politically (Chanter, 2001:26 n.11).

A generous reading then, of the feminine in Levinas's work sees the radical potentiality of the feminine to break up categories of being and to create the possibility of ethics. A less generous one takes note that Levinas reiterates the most traditional stereotypes when he characterises the feminine as a dimension of silence, mystery, hiding, modesty, withdrawal, domesticity and maternity. This is of concern if we forget these are metaphors and not intended to confine real women, although it is also naïve to forget the power of language to shape reality.

Sandford concludes in her review of Levinas, feminism and the feminine, by saying that if we were to ask whether the thinking of the feminine in Levinas's philosophy could provide resources for feminism, that the answer would be 'no'(Sandford, 2002:157).

However her last word is that there is more to feminist reading than trawling for resources and that in spite of the real problems raised by some of Levinas's texts there are many reasons why feminists might want to continue to read Levinas. She claims, for example that his work complicates our traditional binary presumptions with regard to sex difference, and that while this would be 'very far from anything that Levinas intended when he began his meditations on the feminine and sex difference', 'Nevertheless', she says 'it is one of its implications'(Sandford, 2002:158).

For me, as with others who have written about it, I recognise both potential and problems Levinas's portrayal of the 'feminine' and find that his thinking on language as a site for the ethical more helpful to my thinking, especially his stimulating reflections on the amphibology of language and the interaction of the Saying and the Said.

Ultimately, for me, his work is most significant for what it performs. As Chanter puts it, 'Perhaps the seduction of Levinas's work lies in its poetical, prophetic tone – he is a poet despite himself' (Chanter 2001:8). This is also how Derrida would read him.

> Levinas' writing ... forbids the prosaic disembodiment into conceptual frameworks that is the first violence of all commentary. Certainly, Levinas recommends the good usage of prose which breaks Dionysiac charm or

violence, and forbids poetic rapture, but to no avail: in *Totality and Infinity* the use of metaphor, remaining admirable and most often – if not always – beyond rhetorical abuse, shelters within its pathos the most decisive movements of the discourse. (Derrida, in Chanter, 2001:8).

Chapter 5

A Literary Turn

Having begun this thesis with a report of evidence of brutal rape being used as a tool of conflict and with the conjuring up of awful injuries to real women's bodies that this involves, it may come as something of a surprise to find that my response to the bloody /fleshly /painful/ destructive reality of male violence against women is to turn to literature and moreover to literature written by a man, and that I now propose, in the final two chapters, to engage with work by the white South African novelist, essayist and critic, J. M. Coetzee.

This response obviously begs some questions; firstly why the turn to literature in the search for some kind of preventative strategy with regard to the situation of ongoing, cross-cultural, ubiquitous violence against women. The purpose of the preceding chapters has been to begin to discover answers to such a question, so I will now reiterate briefly some of the main issues covered thus far. Since I regard myself as one whose consciousness particularly with regard to this issue, has been raised and nurtured by my feminist foremothers, especially activists and campaigners, it is also reasonable to ask why, instead of at least adding to the sum of knowledge of womens' experience in this area by using literature authored by women, am I engaging instead with work written by a man. In the rest of this chapter I will review precedents and reasons for such an engagement as they are found in the development of feminist literary criticism. Finally there is the question of why I intend to use the work of this particular man as a case study, and this I intend to clarify in the following chapter.

Poesis and the disruption of social imaginaries

While the motivation for my work stems from a passionate desire to improve the lot of women in very concrete ways, I have come to see that political activism, legislation, consciousness-raising cannot *of itself* lead to the kind of cultural change that could have a long term and lasting effect on this situation. This project then has been inspired by Chopp's contention that there is within poetics a power to disrupt social imaginaries and by the hope that within the 'operation' of certain kinds of

literature within culture there is to be found a complimentary path to activism, such that both together may lead to an eventual improvement in women's lives with regard to male violence.

What might literature do in this context? Some of the ways in which literature might operate in this fashion, have been alluded to in my discussion of Paul Ricoeur's understanding of the operation of metaphor, in Julia Kristeva's writing on the revolutionary power of poetic language, and Levinas's thinking on the Saying and the Said

Reinforcing, my previous discussion of Ricoeur's understanding of the operation of metaphor, is this insight from Walton

> The work of Paul Ricoeur provides one of the most important resources for those who would argue that literature has political significance. At the centre of his thinking is the claim that through metaphoric utterance we do not merely describe what exists or communicate our experience: we create and recreate the world. The metaphor accomplishes this as it brings previously unrelated elements together in an act of semantic innovation. (Walton, 2007b:55).

As Valdés expresses it in his introduction to *A Ricoeur Reader*, when 'two energies converge' as they do in the operation of metaphor, they open up 'an unknown referential field within language' (Ricoeur, 1991:15 in Walton, 2007b:55). This as Walton expresses it 'sends fissures and cracks through the surface of the known world we currently inhabit' (Walton, 2007b:55). Ricoeur argues that this brings down the fragile shelters we have built to stabilize our lives and changes

> our way of dwelling in the world...metaphor shatters not only the previous structures of our language but also the previous structures of what we call reality...With metaphor we experience the metamorphosis of language and reality (Ricoeur, 1991:85 in Walton, 2007b:55).

The issue that Walton goes on to identify is that of whether literature clarifies reality for us as has been claimed by some, or does it rather call into question, destabilise what we understand to be reality and open the way for fresh understandings. She claims that ' Precisely because the literary work *is* illusion, artifice, fiction, not what it appears to be – the more valuable the function it fulfils as a probe, a means of night vision and a passage way between alternate worlds'(Walton, 2007b:55). Or as Ricoeur himself asserts,

> The more imagination deviates from that which is called reality in ordinary vision the more it approaches the heart of reality which is no longer the world of manipulable objects, but the world into which we have been thrown by birth and within which we try to orient ourselves by projecting our innermost possibilities upon it … Under the *shock of fiction* reality becomes problematic for us (Ricoeur, 1991:133 in Walton, 2007b:55, emphasis added).

As Walton says with regard to Ricoeur,

> Thus the metaphor, as a site of a meeting which defies the subject /object order of the regulated world, can also be interpreted as the space in which we are enabled to make a privileged encounter with alterity (Walton, 2007b:56).

Employing of the work of Kristeva and Levinas in my discussion, I have demonstrated that Ricoeur 'is not alone amongst contemporary theorists in his fascination with the disruption that poetic language represents in a symbolic order that is predicated upon the banishment of the Other from representation' (Walton, 2007b:56-57).

As Derek Attridge in his book *The Singularity of Literature* expresses this point,
'To create an artwork, then, is to bring into existence a configuration of cultural materials that, at least to a certain group and for a certain time, holds out the possibility of a repeated encounter with alterity'(Attridge, 2004b:28).

Testimony

With my imagination stirred by Chopp's suggestion that poetics might contribute to cultural change, I engaged with one of the texts that had influenced her thinking. In their book, *Testimony,* Felman and Laub explore the act of testimony, of what it means to try to speak of that which culture might not want to, or be able to, hear. I traced this struggle to testify through their account of witness to the Holocaust. I also turned to Tal's documentation of the emergence of witness to incest and sexual abuse. In her book *Worlds of Hurt,* seeking to establish what helps and hinders the emergence of such witness into our shared consciousness. I found that one way for such testimony to be heard most effectively is through its expression in art forms and in poetry which become vehicles of communication, bridges between people when trauma has shattered narrative accounts. While it is vital if violence experienced by a particular group in society is to be prevented that testimony and witness to how things have been, to how bad they can get, surfaces, I want to go beyond even such power of poetry and other literature to attempt to convey the unspeakable, in order to explore what kind of writing might disrupt existing discourses that contribute to oppression. This has led me to the work of Kristeva and Levinas.

Julia Kristeva

Earlier, I highlighted the work of Julia Kristeva on the revolutionary power of poetic language. To recap, again using Walton's analysis,

> Julia Kristeva, for example, takes as a major focus within her oeuvre, the way in which poetic language embodies that which is repressed in the achievement of subjectivity (our ecstatic union with the other, our bodily desires, our indiscreet sensations, our sense of things beyond language, all that is 'feminine' in an order based on the word of the father) and carries its destructive and regenerative power into the realm of language and culture (Walton, 2007b:57).

Emmanuel Levinas

Levinas's use of the image of the face of the other that compels obligation, that lays on us a non-reciprocal responsibility for that other is extremely challenging in the light of the violence that shadows relationships between men and women. It is one that will be alluded to in my 'reading' of Coetzee's fiction in chapter Seven. His subsequent location of the ethical in the operation of language, with the Saying performing the 'address' to or 'invocation' of the other even within the ordering Said of language offers another image for the staging of the ethical relationship.

As I have suggested, in spite of his reservations with regard to the operation of poetic language Levinas himself reveals the amphibology, the openness of language in his own writing in particular *Otherwise than Being*. He also came to see this possibility in poetic language. Writing of Celan's poetry he understood it as an address to the other. He suggests that the poetry speaks in a language 'of and for proximity …a sign made to the other, a handshake, a speaking without speech – much more important in its 'inclination' than its message' (Levinas, 1978;17-18 in Hawkins, 2002:40).

Womens' experience, or the 'feminine'?

> *One can't make revolution at the level of language and desire, says Clément; one can't make revolution without a consideration of language and desire, replies Cixous* (Eagleton, 1991:15).

The movement of feminism as a whole has been driven by a reaction to violence, and oppression be it physical, psychological, emotional, structural, of men and patriarchal society, towards women. This initially found expression principally in practical activism and political response, although alongside this there has always been a relationship between feminism and the politics and practice of reading. This thesis has also developed as a response to the reality of male violence against women but explores the potential disruptive effect of the poetic on the social imaginary as a possible complimentary avenue to feminist political activism in addressing this issue.

In this turn to literature and given that I position myself as a feminist, it might be expected that my interest will be in literature that enlarges understanding of women's experience, encompassing testimony of women, written by women, such as the surfacing of testimony to sexual abuse that I have previously documented. However this is not the only way that feminist critics have engaged with literature, the history of feminist literary criticism itself offers two separate strands of theory which may at first sight appear conflicting but which I suggest can also come to be seen as complimentary.

Second Wave feminism saw the development of these two trajectories of feminist literary criticism. In response to what was seen as the exclusion or appropriation of women's experience in literature, since the mid 1970s, the dominant mode in Anglo-American criticism has been concerned with 'the specificity of women's writing, a tradition of women authors and has foregrounded an exploration of women's culture' (Eagleton, 1991:9). The term which was coined for this by Elaine Showalter was 'gynocriticism'[55]. For the gynocritic, female experience as expressed by the female author and via the female literary character is authentic experience.

> The gynocritic dedicates herself to the female author and character and develops theories and methodologies based on female experience, the touchstone of authenticity. The gynocritic discovers in her authors and characters an understanding of female identity ...the essential struggle will be towards a coherent identity, a realisation of selfhood and autonomy. The most popular sequence in a gynocritical reading is from reality, to author, to reader, to reality: there is an objective reality which the author apprehends and describes truthfully in her text; the reader appreciates the validity of the text and relates it to her understanding of her own life. In this paradigm, author, character, reader can unite in an exploration of what it means to be female - they can even assert a collective identity as 'we women' and the reader is gratified by having her anger, experience, or hopes confirmed by the author and narrative (Eagleton, 1991:9).[56]

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[55] In Showalter *Toward a Feminist Poetics* (1997).

[56] I have noted that this was the experience of those who produced early testimonies to incest and sexual abuse.

While this approach brought into literary critical discourse the previously neglected or appropriated experience of women, there are difficulties with establishing a distinct category of 'women's writing'. To do so could be seen as essentialist. Whereas in the past men's experience as portrayed in literature has for the most part been the unacknowledged norm and regarded as 'natural',

> ... the construction of a feminine sub-culture, a form of writing which is essentially different from men's, paradoxically shares something of the same difficulty. It too takes culture for nature. The danger here is that the emphasis on difference tends to have the effect of leaving things exactly as they are with women confined to a separate sphere or to lead to a politics of separation (Belsey and Moore, 1997:8).

Therefore, re-valuation of women's experience in literature does not fundamentally challenge the status quo. As Mary Eagleton claims,'[t]he oppositional structures of patriarchal thinking remain firmly in place and hierarchical modes of categorization are sustained' (Eagleton, 1991:6).

With poststructuralist criticism of 1980s there was an increasing involvement of male theorists in feminist literary criticism. Stephen Heath wrote *The Sexual Fix* in 1982, in which he reveals evidence of patriarchal stereotypes in writing both by men and women. In doing so he indicates that the biological sex of the author provides no 'natural' foundation or guarantor of sexual meanings and this challenged the then popular feminist belief that women write differently from men (see Belsey and Moore, 1997:9).

This period also saw the development of the other strand of feminist [57] literary criticism, 'gynesis' which Alice Jardine sets out in her book of the same name. In it she examines the evolution of the work of the 'French' feminists, principally Julia Kristeva, Luce Irigaray, and Hélène Cixous. She makes the claim that it is in France that intellectuals of two generations have rejected parts or all of the conceptual

[57] The designation 'feminist' for this area of theory has been challenged both by advocates and opponents of it.

apparatuses, inherited from nineteenth century Europe. She sees this as also applying to movements directed towards human liberation, including feminism.[58] She adds that

> ... our ways of understanding in the West have been and continue to be complicitous with our ways of oppressing. These writers have laid bare the vicious cycles of imperialism and of liberal and humanist ideology. They have elaborated at length how that ideology is based on reified and naturalized categories, or concepts like "experience" and the "natural"; or in another mode, The Ethical, The Right, The Good or the True (Jardine, 1985:24).

Jardine holds that these categories of the Enlightenment 'have been denaturalized' by the 'French' feminist writers and that in response to them they have invented a 'strange new world' and this has necessitated 'speaking and writing in strange new ways' (Jardine, 1985:24). In *Gynesis* Jardine delineates the Western narratives which she claims were invented by men and sees as being in crisis (see Jardine, 1985:24).

Analysing these narratives has meant returning to the Greek philosophies in which they are grounded and all the dualistic oppositions that determine our ways of thinking. Rethinking those oppositions has meant, among other things putting their "obligatory connotations" into discursive circulation 'In making those connotations explicit one would hope', says Jardine, 'to put them into question' (Jardine, 1985:24). 'In France', she says, 'this rethinking has taken its strongest conceptual leaps, as "philosophy", history" and "literature" have attempted to account for the crisis-in-narrative that is modernity' (Jardine, 1985:24).

Jardine claims that in France

> such rethinking [of the master narratives] has involved above all a reincorporation and reconceptualization of that which has been the master narratives' own 'nonknowledge', what has eluded them, what has engulfed them. This other-than-themselves is almost always a 'space' of some kind

[58] One of the themes addressed in Coetzee's fiction, which I explore, is the often untenable stance of the liberal in the face of oppressive regimes.

> (over which the narrative has lost control), and this space has been coded as *feminine,* as *woman* (Jardine, 1985:25 in Eagleton, 1991:9).

The word 'gynesis' was coined by Jardine to express

> the putting into the discourse of 'woman' as that *process* diagnosed in France as intrinsic to the condition of modernity; indeed, the valorization of the feminine, woman and her obligatory, that is historical connotations, as somehow intrinsic to new and necessary modes of thinking, writing and speaking (Jardine, 1985:25).

Jardine points out that 'woman' in this way of thinking, is not a person but a writing effect, a process. 'French' feminists and others talk of *'l'écriture feminine* by which they mean a certain way writing that via its form, 'unsettles fixed meanings' (Eagleton, 1991:10). Again, as Eagleton describes it,

> ... gynesis gives no special emphasis to female authors and characters ; most of the examples of 'feminine writing' it considers are by men. It is not necessarily preoccupied with women's achievements in history or with women's groups ... Jardine stresses, the location that concerns gynesis is the space, the absence in any discourse that is coded feminine (Eagleton, 1991:10).

The priority that gynocriticism gives to the control of the author, to the emphasis on her finding her unique voice, is refuted by gynesis. As Eagleton explains,' Under the influence of Roland Barthes and Derrida, gynesis points to a textual free play of meaning which cannot be bound by authorial intention or critical analysis' (Eagleton, 1991:10).

Eagleton spells out the issue with gynesis that has troubled those feminists who hold activism and political campaigning to be paramount,

> ... gynesis contains a troubling potential for anti-feminism. Just at the moment when women are discovering a sense of identity, history and the credibility of

> their experience, gynesis tells them that it is illusory, and that their extensive work on the woman author, the female tradition, images of women is at best an interesting cul-de-sac (Eagleton, 1991:11).

Others would contend that gynesis is no cul-de-sac or ivory tower and that there is a power in *'l'écriture feminine'* to disrupt traditional paternalistic discourses. They would deny that

> ... they are ignoring the historical predicament of women: [for] to attack such notions as 'the natural', 'the real', 'the human' is in the interests of feminism, for it destabilises the very order which keeps women oppressed. Furthermore, their emphasis on *female desire* can be judged as both woman-centred and potentially deconstructive (Eagleton, 1991:11).

I want to emphasise that *'l'écriture feminine'* because it is a process, a writing effect, is not seen by those who find value in it as the exclusive preserve of women. As Milena Kostić has written in her essay 'Feminist Theory and Practice in the Poetry of Adrienne Rich',

> The variety and exuberance of writing links with the full orgasmic overflow of female pleasure. Since female desire, what women want, is misrepresented or repressed in a phallocentric society, its expression (through writing) becomes a starting point for deconstructing male control. Therefore feminine writing deliberately undermines all the hierarchical orders of male rationalist philosophy by breaking from the ideal of coherent meaning and good rational style. Feminine language is the language of contradiction, fluidity, illogicality, nonrationality etc. It goes without saying that for French feminist critics some of the greatest male writers (for example Joyce) possess the characteristics of feminine language (Kostić, 2006:76-77).

Jardine herself writes of the female spaces, the feminine in language that gynesis presupposes thus,

> We might say that what is generally referred to as modernity is precisely the acutely interior, unabashedly incestuous exploration of these new female spaces; the perhaps historically unprecedented exploration of the female, differently maternal body. In France, this exploration has settled on the concept of "woman" or the "feminine" as both a metaphor of reading and topography of writing for confronting the breakdown of the paternal metaphor (Jardine, 1985: 33-34).

In this Jardine is drawing on Kristeva's understanding. As I have indicated, what those who are concerned with the *'l'ecriture feminine'* stress, is that men can be part of this too. The feminine is 'not a place for the upholders of the social order but for those marginal 'peripheral figures' – men included, Kristeva suggests -who have no interest in identifying with authority' (Eagleton, 1996:175).

Gynesis and postmodern identities

Gynesis was written in 1985, since when there has been an increased emphasis on multiple markers of identity that offer a more complex interpretation of identity than that based simply on gender difference. In a paper, '"Beyond" Gynocriticism and Gynesis: The Geographics of Identity and the Future of Feminist Criticism,' Susan Friedman has discussed the two strands of feminist literary criticism that I have been considering; gynocriticism and gynesis, from the point of view of what she terms the new geographies of identity. She has noted that sometimes in 1980s the two strands clashed but with the spread of poststucturalism in the American academy

> ... gynocriticism and gynesis have increasingly functioned collaboratively. Whether distinct or intermingling, gynocriticism and gynesis, have shared an emphasis on sexual difference and a privileging of gender as a constituent of identity (Friedman, 1996:14).

She summaries the difference between these two strands thus, ' For gynocriticism, the existence of patriarchy, however changing and historically inflected, serves as the founding justification for treating women writers of different times and places as part of a common tradition based on gender' Where as '[f]or gynesis, the linguistic

inscriptions of masculine/feminine – indeed language's very dependence on the gendered binaries – underlie various feminist unravellings of master narratives and discourses' (Friedman, 1996:14).

Friedman sees a changed context with the emergence of what she terms new geographies of identity, and she claims that in some respects both gynocriticism and gynesis are out of step with advances in theories of subjectivity and identity that are developing in a number of fields .This is because both have privileged gender as a marker of identity over other possible 'identities'. She says that there are other characteristics of identity that could now be considered equally if not more important to that of gender and suggests there are identities where the subject experiences multiple oppression, multiple subject positions, possibly contradictory subject positions. She also advocates consideration of what she calls relationality, situationality, and hybridity in the formation of subjective identity (see Friedman, 1996:16).

In her analysis Friedman claims that the new geographies of identity have undermined both gynocriticism and gynesis because the latter give priority to the single identity marker of gender, above all others. Focusing on her evaluation of gynesis in particular, I note that she says that those who advocate gynesis

> ...would focus on the feminine as it operates discursively in their texts, thus encouraging analysis of how the text's feminine other exists as a disruptive trace, gap, or aporia that tears open master narratives of the symbolic order represented in or constructed by the text. In contrast the new geography of identity brings into focus a fluid matrix rendered invisible by the discourses of gender difference (Friedman, 1996:23-24).

It has always been a challenge to feminism to remember and account for the affect of other markers of identity besides gender, such as race, sexuality, and class. As feminists and justice seekers however we are not done yet with questioning the violence enacted on women because they (we) are women, and Friedman concedes that ' There are still compelling reasons - both epistemological and political – to do a

kind of feminist critical work rooted in gynocriticism and gynesis and modified by the new geography of identity' (Friedman, 1996:28).

In spite of her reservations, Friedman stresses that gender should still be affirmed as a legitimate and necessary category. She says 'A gynetic probing of linguistic processes and effects of gender as distinct from other constituents of subjectivity can bring to the fore the binaries of body and desire as they shape and are shaped by language – issues that went unexamined in poetics that ignored a consideration of gender (Friedman, 1996: 29). And she goes on

> The binary difference upon which gynocriticism and gynesis are founded – male/female and masculine/feminine - have had and continue to have a powerful ideological force in the various cultural formations of sexism and patriarchy, which I do not take to be fixed or essential conditions of oppression, but which, however varied and historically specific nonetheless exist in material forms (Friedman, 1996:29).

I would concur with her assertion that

> Precisely because patriarchal formations have continued material reality, because the historical conditions that led to the rise of gynocriticism and gynesis till exist, these pedagogical and scholarly projects have continued legitimacy and urgency. Literary histories and theory still regularly appear in which women writers as producers of culture remain invisible, in which the feminine exists under constant threat of erasure or appropriation. It is politically imperative that the discourses of gynocriticism and gynesis continue as long as women writers and the issue of the feminine are marginalized or trivialized (Friedman, 1996: 29-30).

Friedman is here asking for the development of both gynocritical and gynetic modes of feminist literary criticism. She is asking for 'a more self consciously locational feminist criticism, a form of critical practice that applies the lessons of the new fluid, relational, and situational geography of identity to the act of doing feminist criticism itself' (Friedman, 1996:31).

The writing by Coetzee that I intend to engage with in the next two chapters is interesting in relation to Friedman's analysis, since it disrupts categories of identity both with regard to race and gender, and political orientation. At times he even questions any assumed higher moral status of the human species, over against other animals.

While these two strands gynocriticism and gynesis are identifiable and have often been set over against one another, this has been recognised as an unhelpful move for the goals of feminism in general. Eagleton sees the difference of approach of these two strands as being able to be interpreted 'not as a radical impasse but as a creative ambiguity' (Eagleton, 1991:15). She cites Clément as defining her task as looking for 'the 'missing links 'that relate politics to the poetic, the social and collective to the personal and familiar, the class struggle to the language of desire' (Clément in Eagleton, 1991:15). She sees the need for feminists to walk in two directions at once, and asserts that while the history of women and present political needs must not be ignored, in the longer term, 'our understanding of masculinity and femininity must be profoundly deconstructed'(Eagleton, 1991:16).

Therefore, while recognising the contribution that both of these approaches have to make in the overall emancipatory project of feminism, in this thesis I will focus on the understanding of the potential of literature opened up by the 'French feminist' school of thinking and argue that it offers a precedent for using male writers, even (or particularly) within a feminist project such as this.

The disruptive power of literature

I have to ask myself at this point whether even with the support of the work of such theorists as Kristeva, and Levinas and a poet such as Celan, I am putting too much faith in the power of literature to rock the foundations of culture and to create fissures and spaces to allow the eruption of fresh ways of thinking.

Having been dominated by theory, by the implications of postmodernism and poststructuralism there has recently developed in the field of literary criticism a period

of post-theory theorizing. In an essay, *What's Left of Theory,* Jonathan Culler asks whether such assertions as I am making on behalf of literary writing can be sustained. He suggests a move to understanding the potential of literature as being to help us ''stage' (rehearse) our own sense of agency and develop an empathetic awareness of those who are unlike us' (Culler, 2000:280).

Culler claims that

> there is a general tendency in recent theory to locate the distinctive features of literature not in particular qualities of language or framings of language, but in the staging of agency and in the relation to otherness into which readers of literature are brought. The effects of literature here depend ...on the special structure of exemplarity in literature.' (Culler, 2000:281-282).

He goes on to claim that 'The explosion of recent theorizing about race, gender and sexuality in the field of literary studies may owe a good deal to the fact that literature provides rich materials for complicating political and sociological accounts of the role of such factors in the construction of identity' (Culler, 2000:283).

It is hard to say definitively whether or not literature has the power to create fissures and spaces to allow the eruption of fresh ways of thinking. This is perhaps a matter of faith, and I guided particularly by the thinking of Kristeva, among others, have come to believe that it is so. However I also contend that the provision of 'rich materials' in literature that complicate political and sociological accounts of the role of race, gender and sexuality in the construction of identity, as identified by Culler, is of itself a sufficient motivation and justification for the turn to literature in such a project as this.

Whilst I advocate being attentive to the strand of feminist literary criticism, of 'French feminist' writers who engage with the theoretical possibilities opened up by the 'feminine spaces' that they locate in literature, this is not a move to neglect the political. I have emphasised that the political and the critical are not necessarily divergent or opposed strands within feminism, nor have they been in the past. As Maggie Humm has claimed

> Feminist politics has always been closely linked to feminist criticism. Campaigns about abortion and sexual violence as much as campaigns about media and cultural representations depend on feminist thinking about subjectivity, the male as cultural norm and psychological and symbolic representations ... Feminist criticism is a highly political activity in its belief that change in the cultural arena is a necessary part of any social change' (Humm, 1994:293).

Embracing, then, the understanding that gynetic theorists affirm, that writing the feminine can be accomplished by men as well as women, and that it is it is the form of writing that enacts this, I have no hesitation in turning to this kind of literature to demonstrate its disruptive power, and to what I intend to show is a fascinating example of this in action in the work of Coetzee.

Chapter 6

Coetzee: writing the unimaginable

> *I am not a herald of community or anything else, as you correctly recognize. I am someone who has intimations of freedom (as every chained prisoner has) and constructs representations - which are shadows of themselves – of people slipping their chains and turning their faces to the light* (Coetzee, 1992:341).

> *This quite astonishing duality, combining an unerring control of fictional time and space with a self-consciousness which threatens it all along is Coetzee's defining characteristic as a novelist. It is this which enables him to allude to complex ideas within works which yet retain an elegant narrative shape. The result is a troubling and brooding resonance within finely wrought fictions which, like characters within them, can never be finally made to yield their full significance in a reduced, extractable form* (Head, 1997:xi).

A chance encounter

Although I had read three of his books over the years and found them to consist of compelling storytelling, my enlisting of the work of J.M. Coetzee for this thesis began with a chance encounter in a University book shop with one of his novels, *Waiting for the Barbarians.* On picking it up, I read on the back cover of this 2004 edition:

> *Waiting for the Barbarians* is an allegory of oppressor and oppressed. Not just a man living through a crisis of confidence in an obscure place in remote times, the Magistrate is an analogue of all men living in complicity with regimes that ignore justice and decency.

My work and thinking on why men do violence to women, on this particular form of oppression and on this specific group of oppressors and oppressed, and my concern

about the way in which men and women might be able to do things differently, led me to think that the theme of this novel might be relevant and of interest in this work. It was on reading *Waiting for the Barbarians* and then reading, chronologically, Coetzee's other works of fiction that my excitement grew. It became clear that these works not only thematize, among other issues, the relationship between the Self and Other that has been central to my concern, but that Coetzee also uses a variety of forms in his writing in such a way as to destabilize the narrative, to interrogate existing accepted discourses, to heighten questions of authority, to ask what it means to speak or to be rendered silent, to colonise or be colonised, all of which go to the heart of issues of oppression. His work throws into question binary divisions in society, offering an experience of what it might mean to live in what might be found to be the space between these divisions. This experience, open-ended and unresolved as it is, is often uncomfortable for readers. It does however suggest the possibility of there being a position in which one does not need to be an oppressor or oppressed, or at least one where complicity in such systems of oppression must be openly acknowledged. Previously in this thesis, I engaged with the suggestion that literature has the power to disrupt the social imaginary, and I believe that Coetzee's fiction is a good example of work that demonstrates the possibility of this.

The question remains as to whether fiction can really achieve what I am claiming for it here. If my concern is to overcome violence against women, might not time be better spent manning (sic) the political barricades, framing laws or building women's refuges? [59] I have already drawn attention to a struggle that surfaced at the heart of feminism in the late twentieth century with the emergence of the 'French' feminists between those who see activism as the necessary response to the situation of women and those whose response takes the form of psychoanalytic exploration, philosophical positioning and/or *'l'écriture féminine'*. As I have indicated, I am not seeking a replacement for activism, but a complimentary strategy. Getting more people to read Coetzee and writers like him will not lead directly to less gender-specific violence.

[59] See discussion in Walton 2007b 49-62.

But I hope that questioning the binary categories that we have inherited, blurring the edges of these and realising that we can 'live in the question', in the borderlands and with indecision, that we can live without having to consolidate our own identity by erasing someone else's, does offer a long term strategy to diminish such violence.

Just as I have turned to the extreme example of the Holocaust in reviewing the role of a 'poetics of testimony', so in employing the work of Coetzee as a case study, I am aware that I seek to point up an important comparison between the oppressions manifest in the colonial and postcolonial, and apartheid and post-apartheid context out of which Coetzee's novels come, and the world-wide oppression of women because they are women. Parallels, that is, between racism and sexism. Some would say that these are unreasonable moves,[60] being far too simplistic. However, while recognising the unique characteristics both of the South African situation, and of the situation of women, I suggest that there is much light to be shed on this project by pursuing such comparisons.[61] Both systems of oppression stem from constructed binary categories, i.e. men/women, black/white, where one side is defined over against the other.[62] In this situation it is so often the oppression of one side of the binary by the other that guarantees the identity of the more powerful element.

There has been much critical discussion as to how and to what degree these fiction works of Coetzee offer an 'adequate' ethico/political response to the context out of which they were written, but my contention would be that the nuanced response that they do offer and the way that they operate, not as rhetoric or polemic but rather as 'experiences' or 'events' that happen to readers, means that they do address the situations of oppression out of which they come, and that they are also able to raise questions about violence in contexts other than those of racial division or colonialism.

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[60] See for example bell hooks *Ain't I Woman* 1983; Pluto Press. See also discussion in Linda Burnham 'Race and Gender: The Limits of Analogy' in *Challenging Racism and Sexism: Alternatives to Genetic Explanations* ed. Ethel Tobach and Betty Rosoff, Feminist Press 1994: 143-163.

[61] See discussion on race in Mark KleinTaylor, 1990

[62] As Coetzee himself has put it in an interview, 'black is black as long as white constructs himself as white' (Begam, 1992:425 in Egeret, 1997:102). See also C.P.Cavafy's poem 'Waiting for the Barbarians'

Locating myself, as I have said, as a feminist thinker, the question may be asked as to whether or not Coetzee's work can be regarded as directly promoting feminist concerns.[63] It could be argued that he has not tackled racial or gender injustice through 'realist' writing, in a direct fashion. It could also feasibly be suggested that he denigrates women in his characterisation of them. His work is complex and many layered and it is difficult to generalise, but, on the whole, the female characters in his books are, for the most part (unless very young and nubile), depicted as unlovely, ugly or old, or both; eccentric, awkward and even at times possibly unhinged.[64] His women are in terms of traditional Enlightenment virtues, moral pragmatists. Nonetheless, his major women characters are uncompromising truth seekers. The degree to which they will travel to the edge of what is socially acceptable in their contexts, in order to act with a degree of self-determination and agency, is dizzying.[65] I would suggest that by refusing to portray the usual 'heroine' stereotypes, Coetzee allows his women characters complex and real humanity, while, paradoxically, reminding us through formal tropes that they are not real. In this he resists any totalization of the feminine other.

Fiona Probyn expands on this point in her paper 'J.M. Coetzee: Writing with/without authority', which is concerned with three white women narrators in Coetzee's novels. She says

> I intend to focus on Coetzee's use of the differences within feminism itself, as well as on his representations of his own self-positioning as not feminist but *feminised,* ...While some critics (Dunbar and Rody) argue that Coetzee's work is 'feminist,' I argue that Coetzee's use of the feminine must instead be read in

[63] See Fiona Probyn 'J.M Coetzee: Writing with/out authority' (2002)
[64] In terms of attractiveness and obvious 'heroic' characteristics Coetzee's male characters fare no better.
[65] I discuss Coetzee's female characters in more detail in the following chapter.

terms of the broader impact of the feminine as a *textual strategy* in the elucidation of settler postcoloniality (Probyn, 2002:2 emphasis added).

Coetzee's background: catching the elusive man

In *Doubling the Point,* a book of articles and interviews, Coetzee acknowledges his reputation for being generally irritable and uncooperative with interviewers (Coetzee, 1992:65). This assessment of himself seems to be borne out by many commentators who find Coetzee elusive and difficult to interview.[66]

Somewhat in his own defence, Coetzee argues that such interviewers believe at some level in 'the confession', whether as something that comes out of legal interrogation, or from the 'transports of unrehearsed speech', while for Coetzee 'truth' he says, 'is related to silence, to reflection, to the practice of *writing*.' For him 'Speech is not a fount of truth but a pale and provisional version of writing' (Coetzee, 1992:65-66).[67]

This trait of not wanting to claim authorial authority, chimes with his whole literary project, where there is an emphasis on texuality, on novels as discursive events in the world beyond the author's controlling hand. However, several critics have noted the extent to which Coetzee's own cultural, racial, linguistic, geographical position does appear to lie at the heart of his work, so it is pertinent to outline what is known of this private and elusive writer's life.[68]

Coetzee was born in Cape Town South Africa in 1940. He grew up in the Karoo, the vast desert and semi-desert area of the Cape province, the isolated and extreme nature of this terrain being used to particular effect in a number of his novels. His father was a lawyer and his mother a school teacher.

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[66] See, for example, Judith Shulevitz claims that 'Coetzee is famously private and famously rigorous in his thinking' (Shulevitz, 'Author Tour', New York Times, Oct 26th 2003).
[67] In *Doubling the Point* the questions and answers were written not taped
[68] See Coetzee's two volumes of autobiographical memoirs, '*Boyhood*' and '*Youth*'

One of the many themes that are apparent in Coetzee's work is that of language – and the social positioning that it enacts. This is particularly highlighted in his novel, *In the Heart of the Country,* where both Afrikaans and English were used in the South African edition. Coetzee himself spoke English at home and Afrikaans with his extended family, a situation which to some extent left him on the margins of both groups. As Dominic Head has commented, Coetzee is not an Afrikaner, but a white South African 'inhabiting a very particular margin, since his background partly distances him from both Afrikaner as well as English affiliations'[69] (Head, 1997:6). This marginality that Coetzee inhabits has been described as doubly troubled by his complicated postcoloniality, and his intellectual alignment towards Europe construed to imply complicity with oppressive systems of power (see Egerer, 1997:103). Much is made by some critics of Coetzee's deployment of the European literary canon and the way in which this positions him as one with the colonisers.

Coetzee's 'European' influences are apparent from his biographical history. He undertook undergraduate studies in English and Maths at the University of Cape Town, which he completed 1961. He then moved to England where he worked in computing while writing his Masters Thesis on Ford Madox Ford which he was awarded by the University of Cape Town in 1963. He relocated to the University of Texas in Austin, USA, in 1965, and completed his doctoral dissertation on the style of Samuel Beckett's English fiction in 1969. The canon of European literature thus formed Coetzee's literary context, and his fiction is characterised by a high degree of intertextuality.[70] Remaining in the United States, he taught at the State University of New York in Buffalo from 1968 to 1971, a period in which he was working on his

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[69] Coetzee has spoken of the term 'Afrikaner' as having three different applications:
1) linguistic and cultural
2) an ideological tool – anti British then anti- Black Nationalism
3) the external activity of naming – a brand imposed on the basis of historical association
He would claim to be able to dissociate from 1 and 2 but not 3
Coetzee resists the descriptive label 'Afrikaner'. He identifies himself with a utopian drive towards cultural and biological hybridity in South Africa, the projected 'rainbow country'
'Afrikaner' is an identity to be both rejected/acknowledged in the present process of historical revision' (Head, 1997:6-7).

[70] See preceding reference to Kristeva's understanding of intertextuality: p 80.

first novel *Dusklands*. In 1972 he returned to South Africa to teach at the University of Cape Town, where he became a Professor of General Literature in 1984. He has since made his home in Australia.[71]

Coetzee's literary works include translations, literary studies, critical essays and two volumes of memoir: *Boyhood: Scenes from Provincial Life,* and *Youth: Scenes from Provincial Life II.* He has also written ten novels at the time of writing. His first work of fiction, *Dusklands* appeared in 1974. It was followed by *In the Heart of the Country* (1977), but it was only after publication of *Waiting for the Barbarians* (1980) that the importance of the first two novels was recognised. These were followed by *The Life and Times of Michael K* (1983); *Foe* (1986); *Age of Iron* (1990); *The Master of St Petersburgh* (1994); *Disgrace* (1999); *Elizabeth Costello* (2003), and most recently *The Slow Man* (2006). He has received much critical acclaim from a number of countries for his work and in 2003 was awarded the Noble Prize in Literature.

Coetzee: modernist or postmodernist?

In trying to position Coetzee within the history of literary movements there has been some discussion on whether he can be called a postmodern or modernist writer. I will not overly concern myself with such categorization since designating Coetzee's writing as modernist or postmodernist is of relevance to my particular interest in his writing only in so far as such designations draw attention to the forms that he uses and the relation in his work between form and themes that engage with ethical and political stances.

However, Derek Attridge, also concerned about the relation between form and politics in Coetzee's writing, explores this point in some detail in his book *J.M.Coetzee and the Ethics of Reading.* He says that 'Because of its use of nonrealist or antirealist

[71] Coetzee is, like Celan, Kristeva and Levinas, now a writer writing in a country which was not his place of origin.

devices, its allusiveness, and its metafictional proclivities, Coetzee's fiction is often adduced as an example of "postmodernism"'(Attridge, 2004a:2). Attridge himself thinks it is better characterized as an instance of 'late modernism' or 'neomodernism' (Attridge, 2004a:2).

In claiming Coetzee's fiction as an example of late modernism, Attridge points out that 'modernism' can be 'a catch-all term for art that is governed by aestheticism, formalism, traditionalism, and political quietism (or reaction), or it can refer to an art of innovation, self-questioning, and the *radical displacement of traditional verities*' (Attridge, 2004a:3). It is this latter 'radical displacement of traditional verities' that I seek to identify in Coetzee's writing.

Attridge goes on to argue that

> ...what often gets called (and condemned as) the self-reflexiveness of modernist writing, its foregrounding of its own linguistic, figurative, and generic operations, its willed interference with the transparency of discourse, is in its effects if not always in its intentions, allied to a new apprehension of the claims of otherness, of that which cannot be expressed in the discourse available to us - not because of an essential ineffability but because of the constraints imposed by that discourse, often in its very productivity and proliferation (Attridge, 2004a:4) (see also Attridge, 2004a:4n7).

Coetzee's work is characterized by its profound self-reflexiveness in what I take to be a very deliberate fashion from this highly fastidious and self-controlled writer. Thus I would concur with Attridge's understanding that Coetzee

> does not merely employ but extends and revitalizes modernist practices, and in so doing develops a mode of writing that allows the attentive reader to live

> through the pressures and possibilities, and also the limits of political engagement (Attridge, 2004a:6).

It is in the later developments of modernism that Attridge claims that these modernist writing practices have been employed 'in conjunction with a thematic interest in gender, race and colonialism' (Attridge, 2004a:6). This is what I find to be the case in Coetzee's fiction.

This new apprehension of the claims of 'otherness' (see Attridge, 2004a:6) is foregrounded by Coetzee's distinctive use of form, which it is claimed is an important part of the effectiveness of Coetzee's works as literature. Attridge also suggests that

> ... this effectiveness is not separate from the importance these works have in the ethico-political realm, rather, to a large extent it constitutes that importance ... this importance is considerable (Attridge, 2004a:6).

Whereas we might expect that literature that engages with the meaning of ethics and politics might suggest a particular line or stance to be taken, it is characteristic of Coetzee's fiction that he denies the reader 'any ethical guidance from an authoritative voice or valorizing metalanguage', and as Attridge claims, with Coetzee, 'We are left to make the difficult judgements ourselves' (Attridge, 2004a:7). I contend that this freedom afforded to the reader is what leads Coetzee's work to be labelled as 'difficult' by some, but it is what brings the reader into contact with the complex questions involved in living an ethical life. What permeates Coetzee's work for the reader is what Attridge calls an aura of 'something like irony' which is achieved by modernist techniques (Attridge, 2004a:7).

Speaking of the first-person narrators of Coetzee's novels, Attridge asserts that;

> At the same time, we remain conscious of these narrating figures as fictional characters, as selves mediated by a language which has not forgotten its mediating role, a language with a density and irreducibility which signals its rhetoric shaping, its intertextual affiliations, its saturatedness with cultural meanings (Attridge, 2004a:7).

Through such use of 'something like irony', and language which unveils its own mediating role in Coetzee's novels, readers' expectations and established forms of discourse are constantly destabilised.

The Performitivity of Literature

The manner in which some writing calls for the disruption of accepted forms of discourse and performs that disruption by the very form that it takes, has already been demonstrated in Celan's later poetry, in Kristeva's writing, as in *Powers of Horror,* and in Levinas's style of writing in *Otherwise Than Being.* As has been suggested, Coetzee's writing is distinguishable from that of most of his South African peers and their realist responses to their context, in that it *enacts* or *performs* the disturbance of the usual authorial discourse. Referring to this quality, Attridge makes a case for the reading such works as Coetzee's, as being an 'event' or 'experience'.

In his book the *Singularity of Literature* (2004b), Attridge argues that literary use of language involves 'the *performing* of meanings and feelings' and that 'what has traditionally been called form is central to this performance' (Attridge, 2004a:9). He takes issue with the traditional opposition of form and content in the history of literary criticism. He says

> As long as this conceptual opposition dominates our thinking about art, form will be considered either as a property to be admired and enjoyed in itself, or as merely a means to a political, ethical, historical or other more "substantial"

> end. In the *Singularity of Literature*, I have argued that the literary use of language involves the *performing* of meanings and feelings, and that what has traditionally been called form is central to this performance (Attridge, 2004a:9).

He goes on to explain that

> The meaning of a literary work then can be understood as a verb rather than as a noun: not something carried away when we have finished reading it, but something that happens as we read or recall it. And that happening occurs only because language is shaped and organized, an active shaping and organizing that we re-live as we experience the literariness of the work (Attridge, 2004a:9).

He claims that literature has a distinct temporal and performative dimension. In an argument that resonates with Ricoeur's understanding of metaphor he claims, 'I am arguing for an engagement with the text that recognizes, and capitalizes on, its potential for reinterpretation, for grafting into new contexts, for fission and fusion' (Attridge, 2004a:10). This is what marks the 'singularity' of the literary work for Attridge, not just its difference from all other works, but 'the new possibilities for thought and feeling it opens up in its creative transformation of familiar norms and habits' (Attridge, 2004a:11).

Attridge, as I have already noted, relates formal innovation in the text, which for him is a modernist trait to the *performance* of an ethical challenge. 'There is' he says 'thus an ethical dimension to any act of literary signification or literary response, and there is also a sense in which the formally innovative text, the one that most estranges itself from the reader, makes the strongest ethical demand' (Attridge, 2004a:11). He goes on

> Formal innovation (...) is innovation in meaning, and is therefore a kind of ethical testing and experiment.
>
> Whatever else the "modernist" text may be doing, it is through its form, which is to say through its staging of human meaning and intentions, a challenge that goes to the heart of the ethical and political.
>
> Otherness, then is at stake in every literary work, and in a particularly conspicuous way in the work that disrupts the illusions of linguistic immediacy and instrumentality. Among these works are some in which otherness is thematized as a central moral and political issue, and in these works modernist techniques may play a particularly important role. Coetzee's novels are cases in point (Attridge, 2004a:11-12).

It is his exemplification of this thematization of otherness that makes Coetzee's fiction so pertinent to this thesis and the fact that it engages at one and the same time, with the context from within which its author comes, and also with broader ethical issues. It lays open to question the relation of otherness generally to language, culture and knowledge.

This is achieved partly by the recurrence of what Attridge describes as '[f]igures of alterity' (Attridge, 2004a:12) in the novels. In a passage that ends with strong echoes of Levinas's thinking on obligation to the other, he says

> The demands these figures make upon the culture which excludes them are also demands made upon all these familiar discourses, which thereby come under pressure to abandon their universalizing pretensions and to recognise their historical origins and contingent existence. The novel can succeed in making these claims felt only if its representational methods convey with sufficient force and richness that alterity, an alterity that makes demands on us

> not by entering into dialogue with us - something that is ruled out in advance – but by the very intensity of its unignorable being there (Attridge, 2004a:13).

Whether his novels are labelled modernist or postmodern, the formal characteristics of Coetzee's texts play a crucial part in opening up the possibility of challenging existing dominant discourses and indeed all discourses including discourses of resistance. As will be seen in examining some of the novels in detail, he does not by any means spare the 'liberal humanist' stance when calling into question the legitimacy of a range of discourses.

The task of writing: Imagining the Unimaginable

I have suggested that some feminist writers have been taken to task for appearing to eschew political activism in favour of mere 'writing' and that Coetzee has similarly been criticized for his reluctance to represent contemporary South African political events directly in his fiction, and 'charged with quietism and rarefied aestheticism' (Moses, 1993:115). Understanding the manner in which he can be seen to address the oppressions that took place in South Africa is important in that it provides a model for the way literature can engage with ethical questions.

A theme that has resounded throughout this thesis is encapsulated in the question, which can very appropriately be asked of Coetzee, as to whether it is 'possible to engage simultaneously with the sophisticated literary questions posed by the poststructuralist/postmodernist turn and directly with key social and political issues of the day' (Head, 1997:8). While Coetzee has been found wanting by some in the political commitment of his writing, others have argued that his is 'a considered programme of intellectual fidelity and revision, which is not only courageous, but probably visionary as well' (Head, 1997:x).

Criticism may have been directed at Coetzee in this respect, partly because his writing

was different, going against the trend of South African writing in many of his predecessors and contemporaries. The tradition of South African literature is to be more dependent on realist conventions (see Head, 1997:1).[72] However for some Coetzee has confounded his detractors by writing 'allegorical tales that reflect upon the metaphysical ground and philosophical landscape in which the present historical controversies and political disputes of his country are rooted' (Moses, 1993:115). I would contend however, that while his writing does this effectively, addressing the situation in South Africa has not been the sole or even chief purpose for him writing as he does. Coetzee himself has suggested a different motivation.

Coetzee's concern in the debate that has dogged the reception of his work in South Africa regarding an adequate literary response to the excesses of the apartheid regime, has centred on distinguishing between the discourses of *history* and *imaginative writing*. He famously and controversially engaged with the issue of the respective roles of literature and history in his address, 'The Novel Today' to the *Weekly Mail* Book Week in 1987.

> In times of intense ideological pressure like the present, when the space in which the novel and history normally coexist like two cows on the same pasture, each minding its own business, is squeezed to almost nothing, the novel, it seems to me, has only two options: supplementarity or rivalry.
>
> A concentration on the development of novelistic form – also a response to a precise political moment – embodies a rivalry with a pointed dialectical agenda, for such a novel would 'evolve its own paradigms and myths' in

[72] '[Politically engaged literature] usually erects history as an a priori structure. For this reason forms of social realism have usually been favoured by politically engaged fiction writers in the South African context. During the apartheid period Nadine Gordimer treated with suspicion the 'disestablishment from the temporal' that results from the modernist attempt to 'transform the world by style'; she concluded that the 'essential gesture' of the white South African writer '[is] to describe the situation so truthfully that the reader cannot evade it' (Gordimer, 1983:248-250 in Marais, 2000:159).

> rivalry with (or 'even enmity' towards) history, which consequently may be demythologized (Coetzee, 1988: 2-5)

Thus, one of the things that is at stake in Coetzee's novels is the relationship between imagination and the real or between textuality and history. He insists on the discursive nature of history, and its difference from – and even its enmity to - the discourse of the novel. Barnard has commented on the implications of Coetzee's position in this respect. She noted that

> In the face of what we might call the dominant counter-hegemonic discourse of the mass democratic movement [in South Africa] in which literature must become a weapon in "the struggle", Coetzee refuses the "correct" position of supplementarity, and claims the separate discourse of the novel, of the story, as his own - beleaguered – terrain (Barnard, 1993:2,3).

As Head says, he is challenging a sense that

> ... it is *de rigueur* for the committed anti-apartheid writer to tilt his or her writing towards a preconceived style of intervention: that is, the documentation of, the bearing witness to, the supplementation of, an agreed history (Head, 1997:11).

Head also suggests that the usual dynamic in a postcolonial situation is for a displaced or hidden history to surface, but in such a situation, Coetzee is refusing to supplement history in his writing and is thus, in his role as a novelist, countering the claims of history per se to represent the truth. In this, rather than making a challenge to history as defined by the colonisers, in order to bring justice to the colonised, Coetzee is 'making a more fundamental challenge to the *idea* of history' (Head, 1997:11). This challenge 'does not discriminate between, say, Afrikaner mythology and anti-apartheid revisionism' (Head, 1997:11) and so might appear to have no political edge.

However, Head argues 'This is a crucial nexus, where the conflation of postmodernism and postcolonialism places stress on *discourse* as power, on the world as text' (Head, 1997: 11).

In illustration of his position on this, Coetzee talks of poem by Zbigniew Herbert 'a poem ... justifying poems that stand back from calls to revolutionary action' (Coetzee, 1992:67). In an interview in *Doubling the Point*, he says

> Herbert feels himself so deeply to be a European and believes with whatever hedgings and reservations, in the vitality, the *social* vitality, of the literature of shepherds, roses, and so forth, in the power of poetry to bring those symbols to life, that he can oppose poetry to the great shambling beast of history ... In Poland one can still hold such beliefs; and who after the events of 1989 would dare to scorn their power. But in Africa ...?
>
> ...In Africa the only pure address one can imagine is a brutally direct one , a sort of pure unmediated representation; what short circuits the imagination, what forces one's face into the thing itself, is what I am here calling history. 'The only address one can imagine' - an admission of defeat. *Therefore* **the task becomes imagining the unimaginable,** imagining a form of address that permits the play of *writing* to start taking place (Coetzee, 1992:67-8 emphasis in text, bold emphasis added).

This contestation over which discourse most effectively embodies 'truth', history or imagination, has been surfacing throughout this thesis. With regard to violence against women, as in colonial situations, history has often been written by oppressors, and therefore 'reclaiming' the history of the oppressed has often been one of the tasks of those seeking radical change. I have been contending that in order to bring about profound change in cultures underpinned by gender-specific violence, there is a need to challenge through poetic and avant-garde writing the *idea* of history, of there being

a single authoritative discourse.[73]

The Coloniser who refuses [74]

Another area in which Coetzee has been challenged is in his allegiance as an African writer to Western literary tradition. As has been noted, his work is highly intertextual within the Western literary canon, although it could be said, because of the destabilising nature of his writing, that Coetzee critiques Western tradition even while employing it as that which he writes over against. In Coetzee this gesture is complex. Even when (as in his novel *Foe,* a reframing of Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*) canonicity and imperialism are seen to overlap, there is still a sense of dependency, of extending the tradition that is still subjected to critical scrutiny.

Coetzee's writing is deeply involved in questioning positions of power, but one senses from his writing, particularly from his two autobiographical memoirs, a discomfort regarding his own position, and that he struggles as to where he might position himself with regard to his own identity. In spite of this he does not embrace easy answers. 'Coetzee demonstrates that while conventional patterns of power/powerlessness invariably inscribe themselves in various ways into the fabric of his novels, they also resist resolution in terms of an either/or fashion' (Egerer, 1997:98).

Politics and Ethics

In a further interview with Attwell in *Doubling the Point,* Coetzee distinguishes between the 'ethical' and the 'political', and says ' I think you will find the contest of interpretations I have sketched here - the political versus the ethical - played out again

[73] This is a theme developed in Coetzee's fiction, particularly in *Waiting for the Barbarians.*
[74] See further discussion at pp 205-206.

and again in my novels' (Coetzee, 1992:338). Coetzee has a distinctive understanding of the difference between the ethical and the political. For him

> ... the ethical involves an always contextualized responsiveness, and responsibility to the other (as singular) and to the future (as unknowable), while the political would be the realm of generalizations, programs and predictions. It's worth noticing the reversal that this implies in the way these terms are often used: here it is the ethical, not the political which is concerned with concrete acts and persons and the political that deals in general rules. ...generalities on which philosophical ethics has usually rested are evasions of the genuinely ethical, which can only be thought through in relation to the singular and contingent (Attridge, 2004a:104-105).

To advocate the ethical in this localised, pragmatic sense seems to be a strategic tactic for Coetzee to avoid the totalising nature of larger 'political' schemes.

In a review article, Barnard speaks of Coetzee's work in the framework of Plato's metaphor of the Cave. She says, 'Coetzee shares something of Plato's scepticism about what the poet might do in the world: a body still chained in darkness can scarcely be an "unacknowledged legislator", nor a herald, nor even a truthful witness' (Barnard, 1993:1). She claims that the shadow-play he evokes in his fiction

> Is not quite the trivial passage of objects before the firelight which Plato has us conceive. It is a shadowy premonition of the impossible, of a different way of seeing: one that can only begin at that moment when, the body is unshackled and then the eyes turn to a new order (Barnard, 1993:1).

For me much of the importance of Coetzee's writing lies in his refusal of the appropriation of the other. As Egerer suggests,

> It is precisely Coetzee's reluctance to inhabit a position in any one category and a willingness to cross repeatedly various borders that serve as a guarantor for Coetzee to avoid the trap of appropriation of otherness. For him, any discourse risks perpetuating the classification into binarisms of, for instance , black and white, as long as it is based on absolute categories of identity and otherness; or, to use Coetzee's own words, [quoted earlier], the 'black is black as long as the white constructs himself as white' (Begam, 1992:425, in Egerer,1997:102).

It is this modelling or performing of non-appropriation of the other that I find so compelling in his work. It is also the extension of this beyond his own context. As Lance Olsen says, '[m]ost significantly', Coetzee's is a writing 'that dissects, recharts, interrogates, challenges, casts into doubt' and thereby 'places civilization, authority, humanism and truth under erasure' (Olsen, 1985:47-56 in Egerer, 1997:95).

Chapter 7

The Novels of J.M. Coetzee

Turning to Coetzee's novels themselves, to draw out some examples of the way in which I am suggesting they operate to disrupt and destabilise other discourses, I find they offer a great richness of form and themes and constitute a literary oeuvre that challenges fixed, closed categories, particularly with regard to understandings of gender and race.

Indeed, Coetzee's work offers something of an embarrassment of riches. As I have pointed out, themes of 'otherness', of how the self can relate to the other without appropriation, of authorial authority, voice and voice-lessness are all present in all Coetzee's novels to date and I could have drawn on any of them to illustrate these themes, However constraints of space mean that I must be selective in the texts that I examine. Having said this, my concern is not just to 'illustrate themes' but rather to convey something of the experience that reading Coetzee's fiction entails.

Dusklands, Coetzee's first novel, exemplifies the kind of book that he would go on to write and stood out against most other work produced out of the South African context at that time, and so I will briefly outline its form and themes. Thereafter, I will 'read' in somewhat greater detail, four other novels: *In the Heart of the Country, Waiting for the Barbarians, Foe,* and *Age of Iron.* Other than *Dusklands,* which shows Coetzee's initial engagement with themes that permeate his work, my choice of these particular books is influenced by the fact that *In the Heart of the Country, Foe,* and *Age of Iron* all have a strong woman's voice as narrator for all or the predominant part of the novel. This lends them a certain initial perspective from a subject position which has often been marginalised. In the books this position is foregrounded while at the same time its fictionality is declared.[75] Finally, *Waiting for the Barbarians* has at its centre issues that are particularly pertinent to this thesis. The books that I have chosen to engage with all also exhibit the effect of Coetzee's use of form to reveal the

[75] Fiona Probyn writes on the white women narrators in three of Coetzee's novels that I will engage with, *In the Heart of the Country, Foe,* and *Age of Iron.* She says 'Coetzee's adoption of the feminine narrative voice constitutes *both* a strategic evasion of a lack of an adequate vantage point from which to speak *and* a strategic encoding of that lack of authority in the figure of a white woman (Probyn, 2002:3).

fictional nature of this literature and point up its self-conscious, self–reflective character, which means that they unsettle preconceptions and expectations of the roles of reader and author alike.

Dusklands

This work is composed of the distinct but interdependent narratives of two novellas: 'The Vietnam Project' and 'The Narrative of Jacobus Coetzee'. These bring the reader face to face with the violence and inhumanity that marked the operation of the US in Vietnam and Cambodia and the activities of the early colonisers of what is now South Africa.

The narrator of 'The Vietnam Project' is Eugene Dawn who is apparently producing a report on the potential efficacy of broadcast propaganda in the conflict with the Vietcong. He comes to dismiss such propaganda as a non-effective military strategy and recommends a massive chemical 'scorched earth' attack on the enemy country itself. Dawn is obviously delusional and completely detached from reality, yet what he suggests in his madness was part of the US policy in Vietnam.

The other novella, 'The Narrative of Jacobus Coetzee' is made up of three seemingly authentic official documents, the first recounting two journeys of a supposed early coloniser in Southern Africa. This is apparently the work of the fictitious editor and historian, S.J. Coetzee.

Although there is obviously a difference in era between these two narratives they reveal subject positions (one from twentieth century American imperialism and the other from eighteenth century Dutch colonialism) that seek self-realisation through dominance (see Attwell, 1998:30).

Coetzee's unsettling use of form was apparent from this first novel, *Dusklands,* which challenged the dominance of realism in the South African novel up until this point.
It might be described as the first modernist or postmodernist South African novel; breaking with the existing convention of realism and clearly announcing its own

artificiality, its own fictionality. The accounts in both of these novellas draw attention to their own fictionality by a number of formal devices and in both it becomes obvious that the reader is not being presented with trustworthy historical accounts, although they are framed in the forms that such accounts have taken in the past.

On the first page of 'The Vietnam Project' the reader is jarred and alerted to the artificial nature of this narrative by the name of Dawn's manager being given as Coetzee. By the end of this novella the first-person present-tense narrative has become an impossibility, telling of events that could not allow for the recording of them. An example of this comes at a point where Dawn has kidnapped his son and is being confronted by his wife and law and court officers he calmly writes 'A convention allows me to record these details' (Coetzee, 1974:42).

In the 'Narrative of Jacobus Coetzee' the conceit that these are authentic accounts of an early coloniser is soon undermined by the glaring inconsistencies in the accounts. In this novella Coetzee also employs a device that was to be used extensively in his second novel, *In the Heart of the Country,* of alternative accounts for a particular event. Here it is the death of a 'Hottentot' servant that has two versions.

The Unknowable Other

David Attwell has said of Coetzee's first novel *Dusklands* that it is an 'agonizing encounter both with colonialism's violence and with the discursive legacy it leaves to its heirs' and that 'in its passion and intellectual ferocity [it is] a reflexive and parodic critique of colonialism and imperialism that is truly felt on the bone' (Attwell, 1998: 29).

Dusklands is the reader's first exposure to the concern that will be at the heart of Coetzee's subsequent novels; that is, how to approach alterity and the representation of, and engagement with the Other. In *Dusklands,* in the 'Narrative of Jacobus Coetzee' section of the book, this is explored through the portrayal of the coloniser and the natives being colonised. The author reveals the way in which previous historical accounts of this colonial encounter routinely fail to signal the gulf that alterity opens up between self and the wholly other, and in doing so negate that which

they purport to represent (see Marais, 2000:161). In *Dusklands,* Coetzee refuses to represent the Namaquas directly or give them a voice.

> This is a refusal to violate the enigmatic Other by reducing him/her to a phenomenal object that is present and therefore representable ... it is an attempt to establish an inadequate relation with the Namaquas, that is a relation that respects their alterity. Instead of evincing a desire to possess the Other by objectifying it, the prosopopeial form of the text is grounded in respect for the Other -- it attempts neither to instantiate nor to negate the Other, but rather, self-reflexively, to suggest its openness to an alterity that cannot be instantiated or negated. This non-totalizing form, which indicates the failure of presence, intimates that the writer's desire for the Other has been transmuted into respect (Marais, 2000:164).

This is the aspect of *Dusklands* that I want to highlight for this thesis, this observation that the experience that the reading of Coetzee's fiction offers us, this *transmutation of desire for the other into respect* (and as we have seen Levinas would say, 'responsibility'). This goes to the heart of the question of right relationships between sexes and races and other previously binary categories of identity in which violence has been part of their construction and maintenance.

In *Dusklands* then, we already see at the beginning of Coetzee's novelistic endeavour his calculated use of form, intertextuality and homage to other styles of writing employed to critique certain discourses and political stances. *Dusklands* offers an explicit challenge to the dominance of realism in African (especially South African) fiction, being distanced from the contemporary South African context first geographically and then historically (see Head, 1997:2-3). At the same time, while obviously commenting on the United States involvement in Vietnam, he alerts the reader to myth making in the South African context, both the romantic mythical history of the country being opened up by 'benevolent' colonisers,[76] and the myths

[76] Teresa Dovey, writing on Coetzee's work from the point of view of Lacanian psychoanalytic theory describes the colonising process thus, '...the erectile and penetrating Phallus is the metaphor operative in defining the enterprise of adventure/exploration writing' (Dovey, 1988: 149).

surrounding what was, at the time of writing, the current South African political situation.

In *Dusklands* we begin to see this double effect present in Coetzee's fiction; the allegorisation of particular current political situations and a broader more universal challenge that Coetzee makes to the totalization of the other, wherever and whenever that might be.

In the Heart of the Country

In the Heart of the Country is written in the first person by Magda, a spinster [77] daughter living on a farm in the desolate area of the Karoo. This barren landscape plays a part in this story, its isolation and aridity mirroring that of Magda's life.[78] In two hundred and sixty-six numbered sections she recounts her relationship to her father and to the servants on the farm. The book begins with an account of Magda's father bringing home a new bride, and Magda apparently murdering her father and new step-mother. However, it eventually appears that Magda's father came back from courting alone, and in time he takes to his bed Anna, the new wife of the coloured servant Hendrik. Disturbed by this and wanting to shock her father into giving up Anna, Magda shoots through the bedroom window, aiming at the ceiling, and accidentally mortally wounds her father. There follow various struggles to dispose of his body. In one surreal account Magda and Hendrik seal off the room with the body from the rest of the house and it floats away. Magda invites Anna and Hendrik to live in the house with her, trying to forge a new kind of relationship with them, beyond that of the traditional master/mistress, servant roles. However life on the farm breaks down without the father (the Father). Hendrik ends up apparently raping Magda (as with a number of parts of Magda's story she records alternative accounts of this supposed event). Eventually, when others come seeking Magda's father, Anna and

[77] Insect imagery applied to individuals occurs frequently in Coetzee's fiction. This is particularly noticeable in *In the Heart of the Country* where it is a recurring motif. The word spinster is used not just to describe Magda's unmarried state but also to conjure up a web-spinning spider. For example: '... spinning my trail from room to room ... the grim widow daughter' (3). 'I am a black widow' (44). There are also clear interstitial resonances here with Kafka's 'Metamorphosis'.

[78] Dovey claims that it is 'the female cavity, the hole, which functions as a metaphor for the pastoral mode [of writing]' (Dovey, 1988:149), and she elaborates on the motif of lack or void at the heart of *In the Heart of the Country* (see Dovey, 1988:149-207).

Hendrik run off leaving Magda alone on the farm. In an increasingly dreamlike sequence Magda tries to communicate with aeroplanes that pass overhead, believing that they are speaking to her in Spanish. However all is apparently not what the reader has been led to believe and in the final pages Magda tells of caring for her father, who although extremely infirm, is still alive.

Coetzee's fiction is always written over against, or traced on top of, as if on a palimpsest, other novelist forms and in this process subverts these forms. Thus it has been claimed that in its form, *In the Heart of the Country* operates as a subversion of the discourse of the South African pastoral novel such as Schreiner's *Story of an African Farm* (see Dovey, 1988:149-207). In *In the Heart of the Country*, Magda feels her isolation, her lack of engagement with the people that surround her, particularly her coloured servants. Where the pastoral novel principally exhibited a love of the land, her concern is the people, but she seeks and fails to establish some kind of new family relationship with the people, who are not her people by blood [79] (see Head, 1997:3).

Being framed as a sort of journal, in numbered sections, we are alerted to the fact that this book

> ... announces from the outset that we are not to suspend disbelief as we read, that our encounter with human lives, thoughts and feelings is to take place against the background of a constant awareness of their mediation by language, generic and other conventions, and artistic decisions (Attridge, 2004a:21).

Dovey claims that Magda's discourse in *In the Heart of the Country* 'does not attain the continuity of narrative at all' (Dovey, 1988:152). However, as with his other fiction, 'in every one of his novels Coetzee's intense prose can produce a readerly involvement that overrides all markers of fictionality' (Attridge, 2004a 22). The device of numbered sections encourages the reader to treat each paragraph as having more self sufficiency than is usually the case with fictional prose with 'each one a

[79] Magda says of the ideal that she longs for 'I have drunk in a myth of a past when beast and man and master lived a common life as innocent as the stars in the sky (7).

little mini-narrative or speculation or diary entry, something like the stanzas of a long poem' (Attridge, 2004a:22). This makes it easier to follow the number of 'alternative' accounts of reality that are staged in the novel.

In writing this novel, Coetzee uses another formal device to draw attention to the place and function of language in writing. As has been noted there were two versions produced, the English/American (1977) and the South African (1978). The South African version presents the dialogue in Afrikaans, which highlights the fact that the main narrative is written in English and thereby sets it in the European fiction tradition. The question of language is foregrounded even more in two soliloquies that Magda addresses to the servants where she provides both English and Afrikaans equivalents for many of her phrases usually, the English first, giving the impression that English is what comes naturally to her and that the Afrikaans is for the benefit of her servants, an attempt to bridge the unbridgeable gap between them (see Attridge, 2004:22).

While the English/American version of the novel does not offer the disturbance of two languages for the reader to engage with, in both versions it immediately becomes clear that Magda's first person narrative is unreliable. In the first section, Magda, the narrator, gives two descriptions of the animals pulling her father's dog cart which supposedly (this account is later substituted by another) brings her father and his new bride to the farmhouse; a horse or two donkeys (1). This section also offers alternative accounts of what she was doing when they arrived; reading or lying down with a towel over her eyes (1). Later in the book we learn that the father in fact arrived back without a bride, and the same words used at the beginning of the book to describe his arrival with a bride are then re-used to describe the arrival back on the farm of Hendrik, the coloured servant, and his bride, Anna (18). The reader then is left with no certainty as to which account is 'true'. All of this brings into prominence the self-consciously constructed nature of the narrative. This is brought into even sharper focus by the irony voiced at points by Magda, for example, 'More detail I cannot give, unless I begin to embroider' (1).

Thus, this unstable narrative offers alternative accounts of some of the key events of the 'story': the father's marriage/affair, his death, Magda's rape by the servant

Hendrik. Magda's own history and that of her family, are also accounted for in a number of ways. For example, she constructs an image of her long-dead mother, saying 'one such as any girl in my position would be likely to make up for herself' (2). Magda seems unable to truly say who she is or what has happened to her so far. Here, a key drama that concerns Coetzee is, as I noted in the previous chapter, played out. History and imagination contend with one another and the possibility of an uncontestable truth is destabilized. In her writing Magda betrays a self-consciousness about the possibility of her own existence simply as text.

Attridge has expressed the discomfort that the reader experiences in trying to follow this story

> The question "What *really* happened?" becomes unanswerable, and in a sense unaskable, since we have been made conscious of what we usually keep out of our minds as we read, that novels, unlike histories, do not tell of what happened (Attridge, 2004a:23-24).

> ...we are made aware of the constructedness of the events and the craftedness of the descriptions, as well as of the author's sovereign power to do whatever he pleases with the narrative. The alterity which Hendrik, as coloured, as servant, represents for Magda, could have been compellingly conveyed without these distortions, but ...[they]... produce a fuller sense of an unknowable other, unknowable to such a degree that the conventions of narrative accounting break down (Attridge, 2004a:26).

The fashion in which the form of the novel throws uncontestable truth and history into question suggests that there is no naturalised position or behaviour for women or men. The dominance of one over the other does not have to be, all is fluid, the past might not be what it seems.

In the Heart of the Country is a complex and multi-layered text, full of intertextual references, as are all Coetzee's novels. Intertextuality also displaces the author's authority and gives resonance and richness to the text, giving the reader other texts to read over against.

Absolute Alterity

As I have been claiming, if one were to isolate one theme that is present across Coetzee's oeuvre it would be an engagement with a witnessing to otherness that does not appropriate the other. This struggle is apparent in a reading of *In the Heart of the Country*. Attridge characterises it thus

> ... the otherness which makes its demands on us as we read Coetzee's novels is not an otherness that exists *outside* language or discourse; it is an otherness brought into being by language, it is what two thousand years of continuously evolving discourse has excluded – and thus constituted – as other. Not simply *its* other, which would, as an opposite still be part of its system; but heterogeneous, inassimilable, and unacknowledged unless it imposes itself upon the prevailing discourse, or unless a fissure is created in that discourse through which it makes itself felt, as happens at some of the most telling moments in Coetzee's writing (Attridge, 2004a:29-30).

As has been suggested, this is exemplified in *In the Heart of the Country* in the portrayal of Hendrik and Anna, two of the coloured servants on the farm. They remain 'enigmatic presences never wholly grasped by the machinery of the text, never securely "in their place"'(Attridge, 2004a:29). In spite of their physical intimacy, Magda doesn't *know* Hendrik (e.g. see section 228) 'There are no communicative breakthroughs in Coetzee's fiction' (Attridge, 2004a:29). The other remains unknown and in this the other remains unappropriated but at the price of separation and distance. This challenges the reader to a more nuanced reflection on the meaning of difference and I will go on to note how this challenge continues in respect of the other novels under consideration.

The Hysterical Daughter

Reading *In the Heart of the Country* it is impossible not to be aware of the engagement with psychoanalytic theories and motifs. Again Coetzee's intertexuality and deployment of motifs from the history of Western thought broaden the reader's perspective, creating an excess of reference for the text. Chiara Briganti contends that

'This novel is explicitly engaged in a dialogue with psychoanalytic discourse – especially Freud's *Studies on Hysteria*' (Briganti, 1998:85), and that Magda is 'scripted by a psychoanalytic discourse' and even as she is 'committed to expose the assumptions that governed the genesis of psychoanalysis' (Briganti, 1998:91). She suggests that Magda's hints at incest, and child-rape in the book, employing the motifs of Freudian psychoanalysis, offer up a destabilisation (although not an outright rejection) of these theories. She claims

> The strategies that she [Magda] adopts to affirm herself as a presence by negotiating her relationship with the father, the recurring references to a possibly incestuous relation with the father and to hysteria involve both appropriation and rejection of her master-narrative. They demand that we, as her readers/listeners, allow for a return of the repressed of psychoanalysis and recall its wavering between seduction theory and sexual fantasy, and perhaps also pay attention to the fact that this wavering parallels the dual view of colonization as violation and benign paternal appropriation (Briganti, 1998:92).

Briganti also contends that this leaves the reader uncomfortable with seeing Magda simply as 'a repressed spinster who spins erotic fantasies about her father or as a violated daughter' (Briganti, 1998:92). For Briganti, the story Magda chooses to inhabit, for most of the book is 'the story of the hysterical daughter' (Briganti, 1998:92). However while she must sometimes strategically inhabit that position, she does so with a high degree of self-consciousness by which she resists ultimate conscription into it. As Briganti elaborates,

> The discontinuities of her narrative reflect not only the nature of woman's process of 'writing the self ' but also, more specifically, her struggle not to give in to aphasia – the destiny that attends the hysterical daughters – and to continue to talk, even though it is only a "father-tongue"(97) that is available to her (Briganti, 1998:93).

Magda manages to affirm her agency, (through the wounding of the father, and her writing of messages in stones, for example) while 'at the same time accepting the

provisionality and positionality of identity' (Briganti, 1998:93). Ultimately she refuses to inhabit completely the position ascribed to her gender by one of the main strands of psychoanalytic discourse and therefore offers a disruption of what has at times in the West been understood as the place of women.

I am not aware whether or not Coetzee drew in any way on Kristeva's thinking on abjection in his writing. I do note that if ever there was a figure that is depicted in such a way as to cause revulsion it is Magda. She conjures up a picture of herself which is overwhelmingly one of physical unloveliness. She is, barren, flat-chested, with meagre sagging buttocks. She says of herself, 'I am eating badly, growing even scrawnier, if that is possible. I suffer from rashes about the neck. I have no beauty to lure him on with' (121). She is described variously as a miserable black virgin, as having a mono-brow, and too many teeth, as insect-like, ugly, witch-like, especially in her isolation at the end of the novel: 'the crone in the black dress flecked with food stains and verdigris, with big teeth pointing in all directions and the mad eyes and mane of grey hair' (135). The picture she has of herself even as a child is relentlessly unappealing

> But the truth is that I have worn black widow-weeds longer than I can remember, for all I know I was a baby in a black diaper waving my rickety little legs, clutching at my black knitted bootees, wailing. Certainly at the age of six I was wearing, day in day out, a hideous bottlegreen frock that draped me from throat to wrists and revealed the merest flash of meagre shins before these were engulfed in black clubshoes (43).

In the descriptions she gives of herself, which may or may not be accurate (she is fictional after all) she seems almost to cross the boundary between insect and human. She has an aura of threat, the black widow, spinning her web, but at the same time, she is depicted as far from being the threatening maternal/sensual Woman, with that role in the book being filled by the (possibly unreal) new wife. If this is a response to the discourse of abjection as elaborated by Kristeva, again it is destabilised, thrown out of kilter.

The Mad-Woman in the Attic

Ian Glenn quotes the following passage from *In the Heart of the Country*

> In the cloister of my room, I am the mad hag I am destined to be. My clothes cake with dribble, I hunch and twist, my feet blossom with horny callouses, this prim voice, spinning out sentences without occasion, gaping with boredom because nothing ever happens on the farm, cracks and oozes the peevish loony sentiments that belong to the dead of night when the censor snores, to the crazy hornpipe I dance with myself (7-8) (Glenn, 1996:130).

He claims that Coetzee, who is widely read in feminist criticism, has chosen that Magda chose to be 'the madwoman in the closet' as 'a way of reaching a certain bodily and expressive freedom, as a way of asserting the body to escape the father censor' (Glenn, 1996:130-131). In this however, she becomes more than the female archetype, particularly, for Coetzee writing from his position in his context, 'she stands for the writer and the uncertainty of the efforts of art' (Glenn, 1996:131). Glenn continues,

> Magda's double status persistently allows Coetzee to use her both to reflect on problems of writing in a colonial context and to examine the psychology of writing, the economies of authorship (Glenn, 1996:131).

For Glenn, 'Magda is between systems, worlds, symbolic orders. She is a powerful surrogate, a stalking horse for Coetzee' (Glenn, 1996:136). The figure of Magda, living her isolated existence in the Karoo, allows Coetzee first of all to reflect on aspects of his own childhood and the feudal order in which he grew up, and to expose the flaws in that order. Also Magda serves 'as an *alter ego* who can explore the dilemmas of the colonial writer cut off from the landscape and its inhabitants' (Glenn, 1996:128), but who is also, by choice, cut off from his/her own colonising lineage. She also allows Coetzee to explore 'the struggle of writing in a tradition not made for the place in which one lives, of not having a medium that can communicate a full range of social insights and social nuance, of being separated, as social subject and author, from the colonial other by language and power' (Glenn, 1996:130).

Coetzee's early novels thus incorporate highly self-conscious reflections on the work of art and its conditions of production. Coetzee's aim, according to Glenn, is 'to prevent, anticipate those answers (psychological, historical, sociological) that might permit us to avoid Magda's spinning of her tale, that might allow us to fit her into some pre-established critical category' (Glenn, 1996:135).

Glenn goes on to suggest that the many intertextual influences in Coetzee's work mean that his work exhibits 'a complexity of texture which works against a notion of univocal influences that are transmitted without being transformed'. He concludes that

> *In the Heart of the Country* presents us with a new texture in the more or less structuralist correspondences Coetzee establishes between sexual, linguistic, economic and artistic codes and their disturbances. The colonial, anthropological consciousness of this exemplary modernist text demands a further critical rethinking of the colonial and its relation to the modern and the modernist (Glenn, 1996:137).

The questions raised here, by Glenn's analysis of *In the Heart of the Country,* lie with the issue of how to live and write, and be neither master nor one who appropriates the voice of the slave, being neither coloniser nor one who totalises the colonised. I leave the last word with Magda, to express this dilemma.

> The medium, the median – that is what I wanted to be! Neither master nor slave, neither parent nor child, but the bridge between, so that in me the contraries should be reconciled! (145).

Waiting for the Barbarians

> *All is allegory .... Each creature is key to all other creatures. A dog sitting in a patch of sun licking itself, says he, is at one moment a dog and at the next a vessel of revelation.* (Coetzee, 2004d:229).

> *So here was an allegory as a stately fastidiousness; or a state of shock. He seemed able to deal with the horror he saw written on the sun only - if brilliantly – if this were to be projected into another time and plane* (Gordimer, 1998:139).

Waiting for the Barbarians [80] was Coetzee's first critical success and was written while he was working in the United States. It is narrated in the first person voice of the Magistrate, the chief Imperial administrator in a small town on the border of an unspecified 'Empire', and it charts a year of his life. Close to the town there live fisher-folk, eking out a simple existence, and beyond the confines of the town, roam the nomadic 'barbarians' of the title (though who really are barbarians is one of the questions that the novel raises). This is a quiet posting in which the magistrate is seeing out his working life, conducting his few administrative duties and otherwise occupying himself with hunting, reading, amateur archaeology, and occasional affairs with the women of the town. Following the circulation of rumours of a barbarian uprising, this rather sleepy, pleasant existence is interrupted by the arrival of Colonel Joll as a representative of the Third Bureau (the internal security service of the Empire). He uses torture to interrogate captured barbarian prisoners. The Magistrate, though disturbed by his methods does not try to intervene. Having finished his quest for truth by torture, Joll leaves and the prisoners are freed and leave the town. It is at this point that the magistrate comes across a young barbarian woman, crippled and blinded by Joll's torture, who has been left behind in the town. He takes her in, and

[80] The novel takes its name from C.P. Cavafy's poem 'Waiting for the Barbarians' about the last days of the Roman Empire in which the arrival of the barbarians is expected but never takes place, leaving the Empire unsure of its own identity without an Other to set itself over against, to oppress. It ends:

> And now what will become of us without Barbarians
> Those people were some sort of solution

(quoted, Attwell, 1993:71).
See also Newman '…the category "barbarian" is a political invention, the recourse of the Imperialist and the racist throughout the centuries' (Newman, 1998:128).

after engaging in a strangely ambiguous, semi-erotic relationship with her, decides to journey into 'barbarian' country to return her to her own people. While he is away from the outpost the Imperial army arrive to engage in an offensive against the barbarians, and on his return, the magistrate is arrested for treasonous dealings with the enemy and he himself is then tortured. The Imperial Army fail in their engagement with the barbarians and along with many of the inhabitants, they abandon the town, leaving the magistrate to go free and resume his official post. The novel closes with the magistrate and the remaining citizens awaiting the possible arrival of the barbarians. By the end of the novel, as in Cavafy's poem, the barbarians have not appeared.

Allegory of Allegories

Waiting for the Barbarians does not have formal devices such as those which disrupt the narratives of Coetzee's first two novels. It appears to consist in a straightforward narrative, albeit with something of the quality of a folk tale or mythical history. However, it is soon apparent that it can be read as a sophisticated allegory which can be applied to a number of different situations. This allegorical form makes us aware of its constructed nature by the use of present tense narration, which signals its own 'impossibility' outside the conventions of the novel and its own fictionality, and therefore draws the reader to look for meaning beyond the surface narrative.

Coetzee's novels are often referred to as allegories in that they are, for the most part, distanced from the time and place in which they were written. As Attridge claims, they have at their hearts characters that are enigmatic and difficult to read. They 'scrupulously avoid any sense of authorial presence', and often do not have a strong narrative drive. They encourage 'the reader to look for meanings beyond the literal, in a realm of significance which the novel may be said to imply without ever directly naming' (Attridge, 2004a:32). It is these qualities that make Coetzee's fiction disturbing for those who prefer to operate out of closely delineated categories of identity and truth.

The situation that *Waiting for the Barbarians* most immediately conjures up is that of the South African context at the time it was written. Attwell demonstrates that the

novel despite its fictional location and indeterminate time, and despite its stated theme of resistance to "the time of History", responds specifically to the discourse and practice of the South African state at a particularly 'paranoid moment' (see Barnard 1993: section 8)

The novel's 'challenge to the "Empire's cruel certainties in its quest for self preservation and its elimination of the "Other", clearly responds to this time of detentions, bannings, torture, and rumours of torture in South Africa' (Barnard, 1993: section 8). In its foregrounding of an oppressive regime and the use of torture, this novel could then be read as an indictment of the atrocities that were keeping apartheid in place (for example the brutal murder of Steve Biko). However in spite of the close correspondence to that situation it can also be read as a universally applicable allegory, of suffering, oppression and moral choice transcending any specific time and place. Both readings do justice to significant aspects of the novel (see Attridge, 2004a:42).

Dovey sees this as a postmodern novel and suggests that 'in the context of postmodernism, the allegorical mode is primarily constructed as the repetition of one text by another' (Dovey, 1996:139). She claims that allegory 'offers a means of coping with problems of, precisely, repetition and authority, and a means of continuing to write despite postmodernity's 'crisis of representation''(Dovey, 1996:139). Dovey reminds us that Coetzee is both in her view a postmodern writer and a postcolonial writer and further a postcolonial writer whose identity is not as one of the postcolonised but rather as a postcoloniser (see Dovey 1996:139-140). This leaves Coetzee with two histories to contend with: 'his own discourse, rooted in the discourses of imperialism, and the suppressed history of the colonised, which has to be recuperated without being arrogated to colonial discourse' (Dovey, 1996:139). In the former he 'needs to avoid unwitting repetition of available modes of (colonial) discourse in his writing' and he needs 'to divest them of their authority.' In the latter he has to be wary of 'his writing taking upon itself an authority which it does not have

and so perpetuating the very power relations between coloniser and colonised which it seeks to avoid' (Dovey, 1996:139-140). [81]

Therefore allegory has been seen to work in two ways in Coetzee's fiction. I have drawn attention to the fact that he allegorizes prior modes of discourse, deliberately inhabiting them in order to deconstruct them and divest them of authority. His works are also, as Dovey points out,

> ... self-reflexive allegories which refer to their own status as speech acts engaged in a process of subject-constitution. As such they depend upon the intervention of the reader for fulfilment – and they recognise that any form of authority which the novelistic discourse might assume will be contested by the discursive context in which the novels are read (Dovey, 1996:140).

In his engagement with Coetzee's fiction, Attridge himself wants to resist obvious allegorical readings of these novels, and seeks to find in them a universally applicable reading 'experience'. He recognises that all reading is on one level an interpretation and therefore what is written is to some degree an allegory, [82] but he wants to read *Waiting for the Barbarians* (and Coetzee's other novels) without strenuously trying to tie it to a particular place or time or make it serve as an allegory for that context. He asks if these novels can be discussed without looking for allegorical meanings and if so, does this empty them of whatever political and ethical significance they might possess? (see Attridge, 2004a:35). For Attridge there is, as has been alluded to, a stress on the performative nature of Coetzee's fiction. The importance of a work is not what it means but what it does (see Attridge, 2004a:36-37).

The danger of allegorical readings for Attridge is of moving too quickly beyond the actual unique world of the novel to locate its significance elsewhere, 'treating it not as an inventive literary work drawing us into unfamiliar, emotional and cognitive territory but as a reminder of what we already know only too well' (Attridge, 2004a:43).

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[81] As has been noted, this is an aspect of his writing that has already surfaced in his former novels, particularly *In the Heart of the Country*).

[82] '...all commentary of a traditional kind is, in a sense, allegorical, in that it attaches ideas to the images and events it encounters in the text.' (Frye, in Attridge 2204a:37)

Liberal humanist discourse

One discourse that is, according to Dovey, prominently allegorized and subverted in this novel and which is relevant both to the situation in South Africa at the time of writing and to other contexts, is the liberal humanist (novelist) discourse. This discourse had been a feature of a number of contemporary (white) South African writers (see Dovey, 1996:141). This explains why *Waiting for the Barbarians* is not for her as self-reflexive as Coetzee's other novels because, she claims, liberal humanist discourse is by its very nature not self-conscious. Coetzee's allegory also points up the fact that the failure of liberal humanist discourse is also located in language itself. She claims that 'liberal humanist discourse does not recognise its status as discourse' (Dovey, 1996:142). It assumes itself to be a universal credible legitimate perspective but it fails, according to Dovey, to 'assimilate the other and the history of the colonised into this universal perspective of liberal humanism' (Dovey, 1996:143). Indeed this novel reveals the 'failure of liberal humanist discourse to see itself as a speech act' which is 'thus engaged in the process of subject constitution which has an agenda of its own' (Dovey, 1996:143).

An example of this is that the Magistrate does not in the beginning articulate a sense of awareness of himself as a subject of discourse, although later, having been forcibly put in the place of the marginalised other his self awareness is sharpened and in a self-reflective moment typical of Coetzee's fiction he says

> No! No! No! ... It is I who am seducing myself, out of vanity, into these meanings and correspondences (44).

Dovey claims that the Magistrate's narrative provides evidence of two broad areas of failure of the liberal humanist discourse the first of which is its failure to interpret and offer resistance to the militarised, totalitarian phase of colonisation. Illustrative of this, Coetzee employs through out the book the metaphor of blindness and sight. At the beginning of the novel, the Magistrate asks if Joll is blind because of his use of dark glasses. At the end of the novel, the Magistrate knows that it was he himself who could not see clearly; he says that something had been staring him in the face all along (see Dovey, 1996:141). Questioning the legitimacy of a liberal humanist standpoint,

broadens the effect of the novel, beyond highlighting the brutality of the South African apartheid regime. It might, for instance offer pause for reflection on other arenas of violence and the often unexamined role of those who think they are enlightened and rational in their response to these situations. For example, in the field of inter-gender relations it offers encouragement for strenuous evaluation of 'new masculinities'.

The metaphor of blindness and sight is very pertinent to my concern for the hidden nature of much violence against women. It is hard for the true extent of the violence to be seen and acknowledged even by those of a liberal persuasion. There may also be reliance on justice systems, and a sense that through them the problem is dealt with effectively when this is far from being the case.

The second failure of the liberal humanist discourse that Dovey notes is exhibited in the Magistrate's relationship to the barbarian girl (see Dovey, 1996:142-143). This unfolds against the background of the Magistrates dawning self understanding. At the start of the book, the Magistrate wants to think of himself as an upholder of justice and liberal values. He wants to maintain a belief in power of the judiciary, a belief in civilisation and the continual progress of humankind. He has an abhorrence of violence, (although in practice sometimes he would rather not know if violence is taking place – be a bystander who does not see and hear like those at Auschwitz), an attitude of tolerance and rationality. He believes he has a capacity for fairly ruthless self scrutiny, and he is not beyond feeling guilty. He would regard himself as having a belief in freedom of choice and individual autonomy (see Dovey, 1996:142).

The Magistrate also wishes to maintain a clear, even absolute distinction between civilisation and barbarianism, while reversing the customary roles that the Empire and nomadic peoples have historically assumed. For the Magistrate, with the arrival of Joll and his 'lawless' methods of interrogation, the empire has lost its own particular claim to civilization because it failed to preserve and promulgate the rule of its own laws, although at least an 'ideal' universal distinction between civilisation and barbarism will have been preserved.

> They will use the law against me as far as it serves them, then they will turn to other methods. That is the Bureau's way. To people who do not operate under statute, legal process is simply one instrument among many (92).

> Let it at the very least be said, if it ever comes to be said, if there is ever anyone in some remote future interested to know the way we lived, that in the farthest outpost of the Empire of light there existed one man who in his heart was not a barbarian (114).

Thus, for a considerable part of the novel the Magistrate is still wedded to the idea of the possibility of a civilised regime, to the binary of civilized /barbarian. Eventually in the face of the barbarity of Joll and Mandel (an officer of the Empire who tortures and abuses the Magistrate) he reverses his thinking on this, and as a good liberal reformist comes to acknowledge his complicity with the Empire. In the end the Magistrate has to concede that he and Joll are two aspects of the same imperial system (see Moses, 1993:119-122).

> Whom will that other girl with the blind face remember: me with my silk robe and my dim lights and my perfumes and oils and my unhappy pleasure, or that other cold man with the mask over his eyes who gave the orders and pondered the sounds of her intimate pain?...though I cringe with shame...I must ask myself, whether, when I lay head to foot with her, fondling and kissing those broken ankles, I was not in my heart of hearts regretting that I could not engrave myself on her as deeply. However kindly she may be treated by her own people, she will never be courted and married in the normal way: she is marked for life as the property of a stranger (135).

> For I was not, as I liked to think, the indulgent pleasure-loving opposite of the cold rigid Colonel. I was the lie that the Empire tells itself when times are easy, he the truth that the Empire tells itself when harsh winds blow. Two sides of imperial rule, no more, no less (135).

Egerer, commenting on the Magistrate's shift from initial faith in the system of the Empire, to his dawning understanding of his complicity with it, says

> ..the Magistrate is oddly reminiscent of what Albert Memmi categorizes as "the colonizer who refuses", that is a person who benefits from colonial rule but who denounces its practices. Memmi rejects notions of innocent *colonialists* by establishing and characterizing two categories of *colonists*: the "colonizer who refuses" and the "colonizer who accepts". Both are implicated in the colonial enterprise, but where the former tries to justify his life in spite of his rejection of the colonial situation, the latter attempts to legitimate colonialism and his own part in it. A "colonizer who refuses" typically insists, like the Magistrate that he never participated in acts of oppression and cruelty, but who suspects nevertheless that he "shares a collective responsibility" as a member of the Empire (Egerer, 1997:109).

I have already alluded to Coetzee's own position and identity, within which he struggles, as being coloniser, even if one who refuses.

In the end, in the public square, as 'barbarian' captives are being abused, the Magistrate shouts "No" rather than "Justice" repudiating not just the Empire but all political regimes, none of which, he has come to believe can lay claim to a totally defensible conception of truth. This expresses Coetzee's distinction between politics and ethics and his understanding of the pitfalls that all political regimes face, of others, which I have outlined in the previous chapter.

As Moses affirms, in *Waiting for the Barbarians,* Coetzee

> ... dramatises the moral dilemmas and political paradoxes of all imperial enterprises. His fiction offers a meditation on the question of whether all civilizations are not necessarily founded upon some arbitrary distinction between the civilized and the barbarian, a historical distinction that seems to require an element of force and compulsion, an act of discrimination that has no moral basis (Moses, 1993:124).

What this novel performs, among many other things, is a questioning of discourses of power and of complicity with discourses of power. Such questions as it raises can pertinently be put to those who think they operate from a liberal humanist perspective.

I see it as also raising questions that need to be put with regard to the use and abuse of power between the sexes, even to those who think they are enlightened in this respect.

Foe

Foe is obviously a rewriting of Daniel Defoe's (the more aristocratic name was adopted by plain Daniel Foe in 1695) novel *The Life and Adventures of Robinson Crusoe*, published in 1719. The most obvious difference between the two is that there is a woman at the centre of Coetzee's version of the story. It is a first person account by one Susan Barton which begins with her story of how she was cast ashore on a desert island, where she was helped from the sea by Friday, the black servant of the other castaway on the island, Cruso (sic). It recounts her year-long sojourn on the island with Cruso and Friday. Ostensibly written after her rescue and return to England with Friday, Cruso having perished on the voyage home, it is an account written for the writer, Foe, in the hope that he will be able to re-shape it in such a way as to make it publishable. Susan's account of her time on the island is followed by letters addressed to Foe seeking his help. He, in hiding from his creditors, remains elusive for some time, but she eventually encounters him. Susan wants to tell the story of her time on the island, although she admits that nothing of great substance happened, whereas Foe is more interested in the story of her time before she was castaway and of her search for her lost daughter. The question of her lost daughter, her identity and recognition of her, becomes one of the strands of this novel. Readers may recognise in this story involving the daughter similarities to another of Defoe's fictions, *Roxana*.

This book then is a 'robinsonnade', one of a number of works inspired by Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*. The work on which it is modelled is, as Egerer says, 'still visible enough to make strange what appears familiar at first glance'(Egerer, 1997:112). She draws attention to the differences between the original and its successor and explains that 'What first appears as a version of the discourse of the Same in the novel is revealed to contain irreducible differences. Obvious borrowings from Defoe's novels – the characters of Cruso and Friday and the island episode – turn out to be major distortions of the originals' (Egerer, 1997:113).

Cruso then differs from Crusoe, by more than a missing letter. He is a much reduced figure in comparison with Defoe's Crusoe; he is does not tell his own story, he is not the 'master' of his own narrative; indeed by the time Susan comes to tell her story he is dead. On the island he seems to have slipped into mundane habits of existence and has no interest in establishing some kind of kingdom of his own. He does not try to teach Friday anything beyond what is necessary for him to be Cruso's servant and he appears to have lost all desire to escape. 'In *Foe,* Cruso is merely an old man who lives in what appears to be self-chosen exile, building meaningless stone walls and when the castaways are finally rescued by a merchant ship, Cruso dies of "woe, the extremest woe"' (43) (Egerer, 1997:113).

Friday in *Foe* also differs from Friday in *Robinson Crusoe.* His physical appearance is different, he has negroid features in *Foe,* whereas in *Robinson Crusoe* he is a 'dun olive Colour' with a small nose 'not flat like Negroes' and 'thin Lips' (Defoe, 2056)' (Egerer, 1997:113-114). The main difference however is his inability to speak because of his (apparent) lack of a tongue. Therefore, he does not parrot Cruso's words as Friday does in *Robinson Crusoe* (see Egerer, 1997:114). I will go on to discuss how central Friday's silence is to the novel.

Another notable difference is that even the island is not the lush tropical paradise of *Robinson Crusoe*, but a much more barren place. It is not a place of peaceful exile but one where the howling wind and shrieking apes nearly induce madness. It is described as a bleak place where Cruso's "morose silence" (36) and meaningless industriousness "would brook no change" (27). In some respects Susan, with her statuesque frame and organising energy, is offered as a substitute Cruso[e], as the proper castaway, one who knows how to behave as would be expected in a traditional castaway story (see Egerer, 1997:114-115).

> ...she is strangely knowledgeable about the genre of castaway stories in general and *Robinson Crusoe* in particular, which signals her metafictional status in Coetzee's text. This posits Susan within the Defoeian framework of thought, making her a metafictional interloper in Coetzee's novel, a castaway

> from another time and as much out of place in *Foe* as her being a woman would make her in *Robinson Crusoe* (Egerer, 1997:115).

In terms of the role that form plays in the 'performance' of this novel, these differences mark out Coetzee's book from *Robinson Crusoe*, in order to focus attention on certain elements in Foe. As Egerer concludes,

> It is *Foe's* status as yet another text in the series of *robinsonnades* ... where the overt and covert allusions to *Robinson Crusoe* resound throughout the novel, creating its subtext, that entices the reader to engage in the labyrinthine game of establishing similarities *and* differences which leads ... to a questioning of certain givens (Egerer, 1997:115-116).

Another use that Coetzee makes of a formal device is to place quotation marks before each of Susan's paragraphs, reminding us continually that this is not 'the mysterious immaterial language most fiction uses as its medium, nor even a representation of speech, but a representation in writing *of* writing' (Attridge, 1996:172).The quotation marks disappear towards the end of the novel and this leaves the reader to question as to when and how are the subsequent passages being produced and to what audience are they directed (see Attridge, 1996:173).

Attridge describes the novel as having a 'chiselled style' which he claims 'goes hand in hand with the intertextual allusiveness to reinforce the awareness that all representation is mediated through the discourses that culture provides' (Attridge, 1996:173). The obvious use of language in such a way as to evoke an eighteenth century style, Attridge sees as a 'distancing device rendering us conscious of the artefact we have before us' (Attridge, 1996:174). Yet in spite of this, due to the quality of Coetzee's writing that I noted earlier, the text can still be read as a credible account of reality. Coetzee's intertextual allusions therefore throw into high relief a woman; Susan and a black man; Friday; two characters belonging to groups which are usually marginalised in discourse.

A Story of Substance

The novel *Foe* is 'riddled' with questions as to who is real and who is fictional, questions of identity being created in narrative, of what is story and what is reality. At first Foe himself is a shadowy and inaccessible character, to such an extent that it comes as something of a surprise when Susan finally encounters him in the flesh. There is also the girl in the story, who may or may not be Susan's daughter. In a move reminiscent of a fairy tale, Susan tries to lose her in the woods. The identity and character of Cruso are also ill defined and the history, thoughts, motivations of Friday are inaccessible, subject only to conjecture since he cannot speak, having, we are told, had his tongue cut out, but when and by whom we do not know.

The importance of the ability to construct one's own story, on one's own terms is shown to be crucial (although the reader is continually reminded by the formal characteristics of the book that these are fictional characters). A fundamental question raised by the novel is who has the power and authority to author their own story, and whether this position is available to those usually marginalised in culture; women, black people, servants, slaves, the silenced.

In *Foe* the one who is known as the 'author', Foe, becomes the recipient of Susan Barton's story; he is the, at first unnamed, 'you' that it is directed to (see Dovey, 1988:341-342). However as the novel progresses Susan begins to doubt her ownership of her own story. She (who is not sure if she is an author) writes

> In the beginning I thought I would tell you the story of the island and, being done with that, return to my former life. But now all my life grows to be story and there is nothing of my own left to me. I thought I was myself and this girl a creature from another order speaking words you made up for her. But now I am full of doubt. Nothing is left to me but doubt. I am doubt itself. Who is speaking me? Am I a phantom too? To what order do I belong? And you: who are you? (133).

Susan [83] feels that she lacks substance as an individual until the story of her year on the island with Cruso is accepted as a legitimate narrative and written as such, yet she is 'barred from the domain of authorship by her gender, her social status, her economic dependence and her unfamiliarity with the requirements of published narratives' (Attridge, 1996:176). She says

> Return to me the substance I have lost, Mr Foe: that is my entreaty. For though my story gives the truth, it does not give the substance of the truth (I see clearly that we need not pretend it is otherwise) (51).

She also says, 'I would rather be the author of my story than have lies told about me ...If I cannot come forward as author and swear to the truth of my tale, what will be the worth of it?' (40)

When Foe goes into hiding from his creditors, and the possibility of her story being written recedes, she complains, '[M]y life is drearily suspended till your writing is done' (63) and as her wait for the story to be written lengthens her whole identity is thrown into question '... now all my life grows to be story and there is nothing of my own left to me' (133).

Daniel Defoe has been regarded as the father of the English novel, and Dovey makes the point that the character of Susan Barton, who wants to write her own story, and the novel as a whole challenges what she calls the 'Author function' (Dovey, 1988:333-334). Susan is seeking a place from which to speak within the masculine establishment but she is dependant on Foe as an author, so when he goes into hiding she must increasingly assume the burden of her story. She occupies Foe's house and uses his writing materials. Dovey sees this as a deconstructive strategy and reminds us that Gilbert and Gubar draw attention to 'the literal and figural confinement of women' (Dovey, 1988:355).

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[82] There is a strong temptation to refer to this character as Susan, which I do, instead of Barton, but I note that as is the usual convention, the male characters (except Friday) are referred to by their surnames. Friday has an imposed name, not his own.

For Dovey the novel provides the ground for a debate between discourses of feminism, post-colonialism and postmodernism (see Dovey, 1988:334), and for her all these discourses are engaged in an attempt to 'represent the unrepresentable' (Dovey, 1988:336). She refers to the work of Gilbert and Gubar on the writing of women who contend that 'the one plot that seems to be concealed in most of the nineteenth century literature by women (...) is in some sense a story of the woman writer's quest for her own story; it is the story, in other words, of the woman's quest for self-definition' (Gilbert and Gubar, 1979:75-76 in Dovey, 1988:341).

Susan Barton (who Attridge tantalisingly says might be the author of the narratives of Cruso and Foe, for all we know) is

> aware of the constituting capacities of narrative and the emptiness of existence outside her culture's canonic stories, yet at the same time irresistibly (and understandably) attached to the notion of a subjectivity and substantiality which does not have to be grounded in the conventions of narrative (Attridge, 1996:177).

Concerning her life before being a castaway, she says to Foe,

> I choose not to tell it because to no one, not even to you, do I owe proof that I am a substantial being with a substantial history in the world. I choose rather to tell of the island, of myself and Cruso and Friday and what we three did there; for I am a free woman who asserts her freedom by telling her story according to her own desire (131).

The novel, *Foe*, may reveal that 'human experience seems lacking in substance and significance if it is not represented (to oneself and others) in culturally validated narrative forms, but those narrative forms constantly threaten, by their exteriority and conventionality, the substantiality of that experience' (Attridge, 1996:178).

This theme of being able to author one's own story, particularly with respect to women's stories is obviously of great relevance to this thesis. However there is a danger, already alluded to, that focussing on women's experience as such, its place in

the literary canon, and within the social imaginary, leads to a separatist mentality. [84] One question that Coetzee raises in this novel is whether in owning and authoring their own 'story' telling their own experience in their own way, women can be radically Other, not an inversion of the Same. Coetzee, never one to side-step the ethical complexities of an issue, goes on to suggest that even while authoring her own story, Susan is in danger of taking over Friday's story and moving from being marginalised and silenced herself, to silencing another. As has been noted previously, this is also an issue that has surfaced in the history of feminism, with regard to representation for other than white feminists.

The Voice of Friday

A key difference between *Foe* and *Robinson Crusoe* that captures the reader's attention, calling out to be heard, as it were, is Friday's silence. The novel, Egerer claims 'in its entirety circles around Friday's tongueless mouth and for Susan and Foe the key to the story of *Foe* seems to be held and withheld by Friday's silence' (Egerer, 1997:116).

In Egerer's reading, for Susan, Friday is nothing but the "hole in the narrative" that she yearns to fill (121). The story she so desperately wants to tell keeps eluding her, "doggedly holds its silence", because of "the loss of Friday's tongue" (117). There is also the question present but unasked or answered in the narrative, as to whether he was also emasculated (see 119). Friday is nothing but a thing that obstructs the telling of her story, and her desire to find a means to give "voice to Friday" (118) is 'not that of bringing Friday to speech but that of speaking Friday's silences : the voice she wishes to give him is her own' (18) (see Huggan, 1990 in Egerer, 1997:116).

We categorise Friday as silenced, as dumb because he does not speak as we speak, but his silence is but an absence of words, he makes other sounds. In the book his noises are deemed sub-human,

[84] See my discussion of feminist literary criticism in Chapter 5.

> who accustomed to the fullness of *human speech,* can be content with the craws and chirps and screeches, and the barking of seals, and the moan of the wind? (8;emphasis added) (Egerer, 1997:119).

Between the dichotomy of silence and speech is noise, and Friday can make these non-speech sounds. For Egerer this is an example of the way in which Coetzee deals with binary constructions. 'Coetzee', she says

> *hybridizes* the binary construction speech/silence, calling into doubt the truth-value of interpretation in general and the validity of either/or explanations in particular. For who is to say at which point "noise" turns into "language" and what presuppositions underlie the strategies used in the attempt to valorize and determine "meaning". In the same vein, the self-same silence that is interpreted as a consequence of subordination can also be seen as a language of empowerment (Egerer, 1997:120).

This comment aptly expresses what I see Coetzee's fiction performing with regard to other binary constructions, with my particular interest focussed on that of the gender binary

Egerer also conducts a fascinating and extended review of what she calls the zero images in the novel. She makes the point that in Western culture the numeral zero signifies absence, emptiness, nothingness. 'In *Foe,* these zero-images puncture the text, embroidering it with eloquent silences that function as a running commentary on both what is said and what is left unsaid'(Egerer, 1997:121).

There are an abundance of zero images in the book, 'images of an iconographic hole with an enclosure around an absence' (Egerer, 1997:121), not least in the description of the island on which Susan, Cruso and Friday are castaways. There is Cruso's hut, void of furniture, "a circle of sticks" (54). The reader can also detect the zero image as Cruso and Friday labour to build meaningless walls around empty barren terraces (see Egerer, 1997:121).

One of the most striking occurrences of a zero image is when, back in England, Susan tries to teach the mute Friday to write as a means to convey his story. He covers the slate with "eyes, open eyes, each set upon a human foot, row upon row of eyes upon feet: walking eyes"(147) Are these as Egerer would have it, Friday's signature, 'a double image, a procession of walking eyes/I's, a multitude of observing thinking subjects'(Egerer, 1997:124) . They indicate then that although Friday cannot speak, he is far from being 'empty' or 'void'' (Egerer, 1997:124). In this incident, Foe and Susan believe that Friday is writing a string of "o"s, because they are at home in the world of letters and words. Egerer conjectures that Coetzee might be having Friday write the numeral 0 and that in doing so 'Friday may be establishing a link with another past and another culture' (Egerer, 1997:125).

In exploring the history of the symbol zero, Egerer concludes that it is a symbol neither of fullness nor emptiness but possibly both. If this is Friday's symbol then he is both

> "full" and "empty" at the same time: empty only in a world where Susan and Foe set the parameters for knowledge, their knowledge, but full of an other, different knowledge not accessible to a gaze which recognises only what it already knows. Cast in a world which can perceive differences only as the other side of sameness, Friday is fated to be the "wholly Other" in every sense of the word (Egerer, 1997:126).

For much of the book it is difficult to read Friday as other than a victim, as Egerer says 'Failing to listen to Friday on his terms, the reader unwittingly re-enacts the total appropriation of the other that runs through *Robinson Crusoe* unquestioned and that *Foe* thematizes explicitly' (Egerer, 1997:129). This is however to ignore the fact that Friday's silence has a power of its own and that in the end it takes over Susan's words, and the narrative as a whole. At one point Susan writes

> "Mr Foe", I proceeded, speaking with gathering difficulty, "when I lived in your house I would sometimes lie awake upstairs listening to the pulse of blood in my ears and to the silence from Friday below, a silence that rose up the stairway like smoke, like a welling of black smoke. Before long I could not

> breathe, I would feel I was stifling in my bed. My lungs, my heart, my head were full of black smoke" (118).

Towards the end of the novel, narration switches to the present tense and a voiceless narrator who in the end tries to hear from Friday "the call of a voice" but all he can hear is noise because from Friday's mouth "issue sounds of the island"(154) Egerer, 1997:135). In Coetzee's narrative we come to see how the 'very symbol of subjection[85], Friday's tongueless silence, can be seen as a means to resist and undermine that subjection by usurping the story, gaining in potency until it finally overwhelms the narration'(Egerer, 1997:136).

> From inside him comes a slow stream, without breath, without interruption. It flows up through his body and out upon me; it passes through the cabin, through the wreck, washing the cliffs and shores of the island, it runs northward and southward to the ends of the earth. Soft and cold, dark and unending, it beats against my eyelids, against the skin of my face (157).

Thus Friday's silence is not concealment (although there are those who read it as such given that it is unclear from the novel whether he actually has no tongue, nor indeed if he has been castrated).[86] It has a powerful effect, and could be said to be analogous to what has been understood by 'the feminine' in discourse. Setting the motif of a void, a tongueless mouth at the heart of the narrative, with the *Robinson Crusoe* story of white male authority visible behind it, again opens up the text to many possible readings and resonances.

Beyond Master and Slave

Friday's silence seems to lead some critics to read Foe as a master/slave narrative

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[85] In her book of poetry, *She Tries her Tongue her Silence Softly Breaks*, M. Nourbese Philip quotes the edict 'Every slave caught speaking his native tongue shall be severely punished. Where necessary the removal of the tongue is recommended. The offending organ, when removed, should be hung on high in a central place so that all may see and tremble' (Nourbese Philip, 1993:32).

[86] See article by Lewis MacLeod "'Do We of Necessity Become Puppets in a Story" or Narrating the World: On Speech, Silence and Discourse in J.M.Coetzee's Foe' who contends that silence is Friday's deliberate strategy to maintain his alterity.

For example, Paul Williams in 'Foe: The Story of Silence' (in Egerer 1997:117), understands Friday as the 'archetypal slave' where slavery is seen as the cause of his silence. There are two accounts of Friday's life before the island supplied by Cruso. The first that he arrived on Cruso's ship "a mere child, a little slaveboy" and the second, given when Cruso was wracked with fever, that Friday is a cannibal Cruso had "saved from being roasted and devoured by fellow cannibals" (12). Neither of these descriptions explains his lack of a tongue. When pushed to explain it, Cruso speculates that 'slavers cut out his tongue and sold him into slavery' (23). It seems impossible to get to the truth of the matter (see Egerer, 1997:117).

However, Susan perceives Friday as the ultimate victim "[f]irst a slave and now a castaway too" and in addition "[r]obbed of his childhood and consigned to a life of silence" (23).

Susan herself divides the world into masters and slaves; thanks to Coetzee, this is the world she inhabits. However the reader might view it, she sees Friday's silence as a "helpless silence" and Friday as "the child of this silence, a child unborn, a child waiting to be born that cannot be born" (122). Sometimes she has a desire to "educate him out of darkness and silence" but realises that this can be supplanted by her need to "use words only as the shortest way to subject him to [her] will" (60). While it would be easy to see her as Friday's benefactor, she is, as colonisers often are, in some senses, both benefactor and oppressor. [87]

Some also see the novel as born out of the South African situation of apartheid, principally because of Coetzee's own background, and because it appears to contain this master/slave motif. For example Robert Post in 'The Noise of Freedom in J. M. Coetzee's Foe' interprets *Foe* as 'an allegory of contemporary South Africa' (Post 1989:145 in Egerer, 1997:118). Allegorised thus, Friday stands for the non-white majority, his 'mutilated mouth is a major cause of his remaining a slave' (Post 1989:147 in Egerer, 1997:118). Susan is interpreted as a representation of the "liberal white South African" and an embodiment of 'the poetic imagination of Coetzee...calling out for non-white South Africans to be permitted speech so that

[87] The Magistrate in *Waiting for the Barbarians* came to realise he was in this position in relation to the barbarian girl.

their plight will be heard and recognised throughout the world' (Post 1989:152-153 in Egerer, 1997:118).

However, Egerer, with whom I would agree, finds this reading limiting and claims that it 'remains blind to Friday's otherness' (Egerer, 1997:118). In accepting this reading of him, she claims that we are implicated in appropriation of Friday. In Levinas's terms I see this as totalization of the unknowable other. This novel then goes beyond traditional master/slave narratives and a simple positioning on either side of that binary division. As Egerer claims, 'the complexity of Coetzee's novel casts doubt not only on resolutions of this kind but on the desire for and pretence of the possibility of resolutions *per se*.' (Egerer, 1997:119).

As Attridge sees it, for Susan

> Friday is a being wholly unfamiliar to her, in terms of race, class, gender, culture. ... His silence, his absolute otherness to her and to her words, is at the heart of Barton's story, both motivating it and circumscribing it (Attridge, 1996:179).

She knows that only Friday in the end can tell his story, but she can find no way to make that happen

> On the island I accepted that I should never learn how Friday lost his tongue [...] But what we can accept in life we cannot accept in history. To tell my story and be silent on Friday's tongue is no better than offering a book for sale with pages in it quietly left empty. Yet the only tongue that can tell Friday's secret is the tongue he has lost! (67)

Susan also knows that her story is incomplete without that of Friday. As she tells Foe, 'if the story seems stupid, that is only because it so doggedly holds its silence. The shadow whose lack you feel is there: it is the loss of Friday's tongue' (117).

This is Levinas's dilemma, as identified by Derrida; that it is impossible to put this experience of absolute otherness into words without appropriating it within the

familiar and thereby losing what makes it other. The temptation then is to appropriate the silenced story; a process Susan describes thus to Foe,

> Friday has no command of words and therefore no defence against being reshaped day by day in conformity with the desires of others. I say he is a cannibal and he becomes a cannibal; I say he is a laundryman and he becomes a laundryman. What is the truth of Friday? You will respond: he is neither cannibal nor laundryman, these are mere names they do not touch his essence, he is a substantial body, he is himself, Friday is Friday. But that is not so. No matter what he is to himself (is he anything to himself? – how can he tell us?) what he is to the world is what I make of him (121-2).
>
> It is for us to descend into the mouth (since we speak in figures). It is for us to open Friday's mouth and hear what it holds: silence perhaps or a roar, like the roar of a seashell held to the ear (142).

As Attridge says of Susan,

> For her, there can be no assurance that all silences will eventually be made to resound with the words of the dominant language, and to tell their stories in canonised narratives – not because there is an inviolable core of silence to which the dominant discourse can never penetrate, but because the most fundamental silence is itself *produced by* – at the same time as it makes possible – the dominant discourse (Attridge, 1996:181).

For those who find themselves unwillingly in the dominant group (which applies to many, including women who, while they themselves suffer oppression in gender specific violence, may also belong to dominant groups), there is no simple remedy to be understood in terms of investing 'Friday' with speech; that would just co-opt him into an existing group. As Attridge spells out

> Effective social and political change, then, is not merely the granting or seizing of a voice (and the power that goes with it) by one or other pre-determined group; it also entails work on the part of members of both

> oppressed and oppressing groups to create breaks in the totalising discourses that produce and reify that grouping itself (Attridge, 1996:184).

This encapsulates the whole thrust of this thesis, and it is my contention that Coetzee's novels, *Foe* among them, create such breaks in 'totalising discourses'.

Age of Iron

> *What matters is that the contest [about having a say] is staged, that the dead have their say, even those who speak from a totally untenable historical position. So; even in an age of iron, pity is not silenced* (Coetzee, 1992:250).

In reading *Age of Iron* we 'eavesdrop' on a letter written in 1968 by a woman in Cape Town; Mrs Elizabeth[88] Curren, who at the beginning of the novel has just learnt that she is dying of cancer. She writes to her daughter in the United States, telling her of how she passes her last days. On the same day that she receives her diagnosis, a vagrant, a non-too presentable alcoholic, Vercueil, appears at her house, making a den for himself in her yard. The book recounts the evolution of the relationship between Mrs Curren and Vercueil. The final delivery of Mrs Curren's letter to her daughter will depend on the willingness of Vercueil to deliver it to the post office after Mrs Curren's death. Another strand of the narrative, which acts as a counterpoint to this story, is the worsening political situation, (it is this that has driven her daughter from the country).Mrs Curren witnesses incidents of the racial unrest including the deaths of two black youths, through her involvement with the lives of her servant, who she knows as 'Florence' (although this is not her actual name) and her family.

The Letter/the Gift

Once again, as with *In the Heart of the Country,* and *Foe,* the narrative in this novel is carried by a letter/journal form. However according to Attridge this is the conceit that we as readers go along with, although it is hard to imagine these words flowing from

[88] There is no mention of her first name in the novel; it has only emerged in interviews with Coetzee. She is always Mrs Curren, keeping a certain distance from the reader and those about her. See Attridge, 2004a:94-95 n 3.

pen on to paper. These words are epistolary to the extent that they are directed to 'a single absent other, an other whose absence is the force which brings the words into being while rendering their task - of communication, above all the communication of love (whatever that might mean) - impossible' (Attridge, 2004a: 91).

This novel might seem a much more direct, realist, comment on the South African political situation than Coetzee's other works but that is certainly not his whole purpose or intention. It is tempting to see Mrs Curren's terminal illness as an allegory of the political health of the country but such a move is fore-stalled in the text itself. Coetzee undermines any force of any such interpretation by having Mrs Curren write: "It was like living in an allegory" (90).

Mrs Curren also 'experiments' with interpreting Vercueil in allegorical terms, which similarly disrupts any attempt by the reader to do so. She suggests he might be "the messenger" (32) and calls his appearance an "annunciation" (5). She wonders in her 'letter' when the time would come "when the jacket fell away and great wings sprouted from his shoulders" (161) (see Attridge, 2004a:102). The novel stages the question; if this is an angel, is it of annunciation, or death?

It is the ending of the novel that finally confirms for the reader the unreality of the conceit of the continuously written letter. Mrs Curren 'writes' "He took me in his arms and held me with mighty force, so that the breath went out of me in a rush. From that embrace there was no warmth to be had" (198).This final scene leaves what Mrs Curren writes in a kind of limbo. In a sense, in the text, these words cannot exist in their supposed letter form. The only reality they have is in the reader's experience, which highlights the essential role of the reader in the life of the text, in a way that the reader is not usually made aware of.

Mrs Curren's letter has been described as a powerfully 'other-directed' piece of writing, (see Attridge, 2004a:92) as illustrated here.

> To live! You are my life; I love you as I love life itself. In the mornings I come out of the house and wet my finger and hold it up to the wind. When the chill is from the northwest, from you quarter, I stand a long time sniffing,

> concentrating my attention in the hope that across ten thousand miles of land and sea some breath will reach me of the milkiness you still carry behind your ears, in the fold of your neck.
>
> The first task laid on me, from today: to resist the craving to share my death. Loving you, loving life, to forgive the living and take my leave without bitterness. To embrace death as my own, mine alone (6).

In the course of the novel, readers witness Mrs Curren's understanding of the world, the, guidelines she has relied on all her life, being shaken. In these her last days she has to reconfigure what it means to be human. Attridge sees Mrs Curren as trying to escape from 'the discourse of knowledge as content and inheritable property' into an 'always contextualised responsiveness, activity and self-questioning' (Attridge, 2004a:92). In the book, this new understanding she gives as gift to her daughter. She writes 'I tell you this story not so that you will feel for me but so that you will learn how things are' (103). However as we noted, even within the universe of the novel this cannot be a real letter, so perhaps this is rather Coetzee's gift to the reader. It is an experience, not a moral lesson. Mrs Curren's is to all intents and purposes a 'death without illumination' (195).

In the world created by the text, Mrs Curren writes the letter rather than phones her daughter because the gift can be better given in this way. She has phoned in the past but it is the written word that is the best mode of transmission in this case. Perhaps Coetzee is saying something here about the gift of the written word which can be detached from its author and experienced free from constraint and obligation. [89]

> On the telephone, love but not truth. In this letter from elsewhere (so long a letter!), truth and love together at last. In every *you* that I pen love flickers and trembles like Saint Elmo's fire; you are with me not as you are today in America, not as you were when you left, but as you are in some deeper and unchanging form: as the beloved, as that which does not die. It is the soul of you that I address, as it is the soul of me that will be left with you when this

[89] 'Writing is that which lives on, because its addressee is always multiple and divided; and to write is therefore to trust the other who will read, other because unknowable and unfixable in advance' (Attridge, 2004a:100).

> letter is over. Like a moth from its case emerging, fanning its wings, that is what, reading, I hope you will glimpse; my soul readying itself for further flight (129)

This is a gift that does not look for reciprocation, it is not a plea for love or help in return, for if it reaches its destination the writer will be dead (or if it is Coetzee that we regard as the writer, he will have set the text free from himself).

The gift cannot be received unless it is sent and therefore a messenger is needed, and an absolute trust must be placed in him or her because outcome cannot be verified once Mrs Curren has died.

Vertiginous Trust [90]

Vercueil is the one on whom trust falls but he, like a number of Coetzee's main characters in other novels, is unreadable. In a highly racially classified society, we do not know what race he belongs to, though we assume he is not white and the reaction of the black characters indicate that he may well be coloured, but this is never spelled out. He is in many ways a void, an absence, the motif that we find at the centre of many of Coetzee's fictions whether it is the space of the land or a virtually voiceless character, like the barbarian girl in *Waiting for the Barbarians* or Friday in *Foe*. The reader can only know Vercueil through Mrs Curren's account of him. It is never clear whether any shared terrain or real communication is developing between them, as might happen in another book. Vercueil remains the unknowable other.

As the personification of absolute alterity, he arrives unheralded and uninvited, and in Levinas's terms, as the face of the wholly other, imposes obligation. Mrs Curren writes to her daughter, "Why do I give this man food? ... For the same reason I gave you my breast" (7).

The decision to trust him has to be made without any guarantees that he is worthy of such trust. In this case, trust, like the novel goes out into the world and cannot be

[90] This theme of trust is largely drawn from the work of Derek Attridge

called back. As Attridge points out, given that she cannot understand Vercueil's inner world, Mrs Curren's trust is 'remarkable' (see Attridge, 2004a:97). Vercueil himself will initially make no commitment to post her letter.

> I don't know' said the man, the messenger, playing with his spoon.
> He will make no promise. and even if he promises, he will do, finally, what he likes (32).

However after Mrs Curren says 'Never mind', he says he'll do it. She writes,

> If there is the slightest breath of trust, obligation, piety left behind when I am gone, he will surely take it
> And if not?
> If not there is no trust and we deserve no better, all of us than to fall into a hole and vanish.
> Because I cannot trust Vercueil I must trust him (130).

Mrs Curren writes to her distant daughter,

> I give my life to Vercueil to carry over. I trust Vercueil because I do not trust Vercueil. I love him because I do not love him. Because he is the weak reed I lean upon him (131).

It is not relevant to reader whether he posts the letter or not, it is Mrs Curren's trust in the unknowable other that we are challenged to learn through this text (see Attridge 2004a:98-99). It would appear that this trust has to be a calculated and deliberate process. It does not come naturally. Vercueil, comes, as Attridge says

> ... as the other who challenges Mrs Curren's very identity, orderliness, cleanliness and thrift just as much as he does her principles of moral responsibility, obligation and charity, and his otherness arises from everything that she (or rather her inherited culture) has rejected in developing those habits and erecting those standards (Attridge, 2004a:99).

For Attridge, Mrs Curren's relationship with Vercueil is a staging of the fundamental ethical relation (see Attridge, 2004a:100) This is ethics as Coetzee regards it as I outlined in the last chapter, grounded in 'the singular, the historical, the contingent' (Attridge, 2004a:100). It is in the details of such a relationship that the ethical is staged as Mrs Curren learns to overcome the habits of a lifetime in her thoughts and actions (see Attridge, 2004a:100).

In the last week of Mrs Curren's life, the code of proper conduct that she has lived by seems to lose its relevance It is difficult for both the reader and presumably for her daughter if she receives the apparent letter, to understand her growing dependence on the dirty, foul-smelling, alcoholic at the same time as she is cutting herself off from all normal sources of help. She appears to become willing to learn from him although he has no apparent skills or wisdom. She will learn from his absolute difference from herself. Attridge sets this relationship in Levinasian terms as one of obligation to the other. He says

> ...Mrs Curren's response to the other in the form of Vercueil can be read as a kind of heightened staging of the very issue of otherness, a story that is continuous with the attempts by such "philosophical" writers as Levinas, Blanchot and Derrida to find ways of engaging this issue (Attridge, 2004a:103).

This other, in the form of Vercueil was in no way sought out by Mrs Curren, he just arrived, as her own child arrived. She writes,

> I did not choose him. He chose me. Or perhaps he merely chose the one house without a dog (12)

> I didn't choose you, but you are the one who is here, and that will have to do. You arrived. It's like having a child. You can't choose the child. It just arrives (71).

What the reader experiences through this work is a coming face to face with the disturbing knowledge that we are already responsible for the other in an absolute way.

As indicated in the previous discussion of Levinas's thinking on obligation, it is possible to refuse such responsibility. An acceptance of it depends on something like 'goodness'. *Age of Iron* is about someone who accepts it, 'without calculation, without forethought – or better, accepts it on the far side of calculation and forethought, at the end of a long life lived according to the rules (and as a classicist Mrs Curren is deeply aware of the long history of those rules)' (Attridge, 2004a:103).An interesting question to pursue is whether such an 'epiphany' would have come to Mrs Curren without the news of her own imminent death.

The Ethical and the Political

All of Coetzee's novels enact the tension between the ethical and the political. His understanding of the distinction between the two was discussed in the previous chapter. In *Age of Iron* the political, which for Coetzee entails the embrace of general rules and universal principles, is manifest in the situation surrounding Florence, Mrs Curren's servant, and her family

Mrs Curren tries to help 'John' who is the friend of 'Florence's son Bheki, when he is injured. In the process she is made to understand the difficulty of building relationships 'across the divide between bourgeois white liberal and committed black revolutionary' (Attridge, 2004a:107). John does not want the support Mrs Curren offers.

> My words fell off him like dead leaves the moment they were uttered. The words of a woman, therefore negligible; of an old woman, therefore doubly negligible; but above all of a white (79).

In John's response he demonstrates all that Coetzee sees as political. His 'single-minded assault on white power involves sexism, ageism, and racism and deafness to any subtleties or qualifications' (Attridge 2004a:107). This leads Mrs Curren to lecture him on the importance of allowing for exceptions to general rules. She has to acknowledge for herself, and this rehearses the moral dilemma for the reader, that there are times that do not allow for, but perhaps more than ever require taking note of such exceptions. The times, Mrs Curren realises do not allow for "all that close

listening, all those exceptions, all that mercy" (81). In a compelling image she argues in favour of "everything indefinite, everything that gives when you press it" (146).

Again, perhaps in an even more stark fashion than with Vercueil, Mrs Curren's interaction with 'John' rehearses a meeting with the absolute other. She does not like him (see 78-79), but she does not distance herself from him.

> Not wanting to love him, how true can I say my love is for you? For love is not like hunger. Love is never sated, stilled. When one loves, one loves more. The more I love you, the more I ought to love him (137).

As Attridge claims, 'Her struggle is a struggle to redefine love – the love that is the origin and driving force of the entire letter – in such a way as to include that which is most resistant to it' (Attridge, 2004a:108-109). She tries to find the love that flows from duty. She writes "What I had not calculated on was that more might be called for than to be good" (165). In this way she works through various positions to the need to address the situation, 'stage by stage, painful detail by painful detail' (Attridge, 2004a:109).

Attridge concludes that

> What is enacted in this novel is the acute ethico-political trauma of the post-colonial world, where no general rule applies, where a conflict of values is endemic, where every code of moral conduct has to be tested and justified afresh in terms of the specific context in which it is being invoked (Attridge, 2004a:110).

Very much in line with the whole thinking of this thesis and affirming that the work of Coetzee functions to perform the disruption of existing discourses in a subtle yet compelling fashion, Attridge says

> The peculiar importance of literature as a cultural practice lies in its capacity to play out these issues, in a process that is not measured in terms of its meaning or its result. Reading a work of literature entails opening oneself to

the unpredictable, the future, the other and thereby accepting the responsibility laid upon one by the work's singularity and difference (Attridge, 2004a: 111).

Only by paying close attention to the penetrating and lucid way in which such terms [trust and love] are questioned in his fiction – operating always as fiction and not disguised as treatise or tract, operating that is in response to the contingent, the unpredictable, the other – can we do justice to Coetzee's work, which does not hesitate to engage with the dominating legacy of Western thought and culture, and to stage, with remarkable results, the transformation that it undergoes, in a curious and conflicted living-on, in our post-colonial world (Attridge, 2004a:112).

Conclusion

A witness to the witnesses

This thesis has been born out of my situated knowledge. Over the last ten years this has come both from being part of the institution of the Christian Church (I am trained in ministry in the Church of Scotland), and also from being a witness to witnesses, the recipient of testimony, being a listening 'other'. This testimony and witness has come specifically from women, to violence and abuse at the hands of men, and I have encountered it in pastoral situations and in my own research into practices in churches world-wide. This process has sensitised me, has opened my eyes and ears and raised my consciousness, to an awareness of the extent and often appalling depth of this abuse of women by men because they/we are women. I now notice more acutely the newspaper reports that week by week offer examples of this violence across a whole spectrum of forms, and locations. A phrase that has been used to describe the character of violence against women the world over is 'endless variety and monotonous similarity' (Rubin, 1975 in Fraser and Nicholson, 1990:28). This has come to seem particularly apt as my knowledge in this field has developed.

From this starting point, my motivation for undertaking this thesis has been to explore the possibility of *cultural change* as a preventative strategy with regard to violence against women. Given that such violence is endemic across cultures and has been present throughout history, such a change would need to go to the very heart of the way we understand ourselves individually and in society with one another. Since I am situated in a Christian context, albeit with many profound reservations with regard to the traditionally hierarchical nature of the church, and the extent to which it as an organisation has underpinned much of the misogyny present in Western culture, and because my thinking has been stimulated by the work of feminist theologian Rebecca Chopp, I also seek to find a theological response to this situation, and understand what form of belief, into what kind of God, might be drawn from it. Encountering the idea that forms of poetic language, and literature more generally, might have a part to play in profound cultural change, also involves me in questioning the nature of theological discourse and that of literature and whether there is as clear a distinction between them as might be assumed.

As with many who experienced the Nazi Holocaust or who have witnessed the testimony of those who lived through it, it would be understandable, having similarly been witness to the holocaust of violence against women, to believe and declare that God is dead or at the very least deaf or that God is him/herself akin to an abusive parent. [91] This has been an anguished and honest response in the face of an apparent lack of intervention in wide-scale genocide and suffering throughout history, by a God traditionally imaged as omnipotent and benign. However, I am not yet ready to abandon all hope of profound change and progress for humankind or for knowledge of a different kind of God who can be thought and spoken of alongside such suffering. For me, to sustain such hope, a theological response must address at the deepest level the need for a change in people's life experiences, particularly in the experiences of those who might be termed as living on the margins of society and vulnerable to violence. Such a theological response therefore has to be profoundly practical in its out working. It cannot just be concerned with reflecting and securing a certain form or function of religion in our culture, or with individual spirituality, but must proclaim a deep seated cultural change which needs to be modelled by the church itself if it is to have any credibility.

I admit this is a utopian enterprise, but in pursuit of this, this thesis advocates a risky journey, perhaps beyond parameters of most current theological discourse into new ways of understanding ourselves both as individual subjects and in relation to one another in our social/cultural networks. I have come to focus on language use and literature as one of the means by which such cultural change and challenge to damaging dominant discourses might happen. There are no guarantees that following this path will lead to a better world, to one free of gender-specific violence, but for me this is where my feminist and Christian commitments lead.

As is apparent, this thesis owes much to Chopp's theological understanding and in drawing together the strands of this work I employ her thinking as expressed in a range of her writing.

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[91] See for example, David Blumenthal *Facing the Abusing God,* Louisville Kentucky: John Knox/Westminster Press, 1993.

'All the couples of opposition are *couples*'

My sense when I began this thesis was that gender-specific violence stems from the way in which categories of identity operate within societies, still (although perhaps more subtlety than in the past) with hierarchical binary terms, such as men/women, white/black, where those with the identity of the dominant term are in a position to oppress the other and build their own identity over against that of the other. I began to consider whether a breaking down of this way of constructing identity might free those on both sides of these oppressor/oppressed binaries, and was concerned to discover how this might be achieved.

Chopp explores this issue in her book *The Power to Speak*. In it she refers to Hélène Cixous 's understanding of the dualized ordering of society, and the fact that even all the ways we have of thinking are rooted in this duality. She says 'As Hélène Cixous points out, the principle ordering gender relations in politics and subjectivity – the place of men and women, the experience of men and women - is exemplified by, and in turns governs from, its centrality in language.' For Cixous this is exemplified by

> dual, *hierarchized* oppositions. Superior/inferior. Myths, legends, books. Philosophical systems. Wherever an ordering intervenes, a law organizes the thinkable by (dual, irreconcilable; or mitiable, dialectical) oppositions. And all the couples of oppositions are *couples*. Does this mean something? Is the fact that logocentrism subjects thought – all of the concepts, the codes , the values – to a two term system, related to "the" couple man/woman? (Cixous, 1981:91 in Chopp, 1991:1-2).

As Chopp characterises it,' The basic patterning, organizing, ordering principle of thought and language, and thus that of the social and symbolic order as the dominant practices and principles in language, subjectivity and politics, is the opposition of two terms, an opposition that forces and reinforces the basic couple of man/woman' (Chopp, 1991:2).

Accordingly, for there to be a change in the formation of gender identities such that allow violence to women to happen, change needs to take place at the deepest level of

the social imaginary of societies, change in the formation of subjectivities, the construction of gender and in politics. This thesis argues that language use and the structuring of language, particularly in literary language is crucial to such a change.

Theology and Theory

Chopp is concerned in much of her work to explore the interaction between critical theory (of which she sees feminist theory as an example) and theology. She writes on the relationship in a chapter,' Theorizing Feminist Theology' for *Horizons in Feminist Theology: Identity, Tradition and Norms,* (1997) a book she edited with Shelia Davaney. Here Chopp charts two stages of feminist theory paralleled by two stages in feminist theology, and notes that the more recent of these stages plots a critique of modern theory. She highlights the ensuing debate in both feminist theory and feminist theology between foundationalism and relativism (see Chopp, 1997:216-217).

Here Chopp again points up the importance of the linguistic turn in postmodern theory. Speaking of modern theory she claims that it was displaced from many positions, by 'those on the margins who would could not or would not occupy the "subject" position of modern theory' and who asked 'whose interests modern truth and power served' (Chopp, 1997:218). She believes that those not represented in the dominant centre of societies came to question how their otherness had been constructed and/or rendered invisible. She says 'Poststructuralist theory uncovered the binary structure that regulated all meaning through oppositional thinking. The linguistic turn in many disciplines revealed that there is no transparency to language , that language itself is constantly changing and that meaning has a rich plurivocity and thus ambiguity' (Chopp, 1997: 218).

As I have indicated much postmodern theory has at its heart a concern with the constitution of the subject. This implies other questions which Chopp raises:

> If the human subject is not secured behind or beyond history, then how is the subject constructed? How can one speak of her identity or what it means to be this particular person in this time or place? Is there an "I" that maintains some unity, be it an ontological "I" or a regulative idea? Or is the subject, to use

> Julia Kristeva's notion, a subject on trial, always in the process of conflict or contradiction. Or do we speak of the subject in Judith Butler's sense, as performative, constituted through reiterated acts? (Chopp, 1997: 219).

Reflecting further on the construction of the gendered subject, Chopp goes on to ask, 'How does the subject in gender or the gendered subject both deconstruct the universalizing of gender and work for change for women? (Chopp, 1997:219). She adds, 'How do we employ the category to make sense of present structures of power and, at the same time, *deconstruct* the category so as to transform the way present structures require gender construction and regulation of gender?' (Chopp, 1997:220 emphasis added). I have indicated that these things need to go on side by side. My own sense is that deconstructing the category is one very significant way to work, although obviously not in a traditionally activist way, to transform the lives of women. To reiterate, my contention is that literature has a significant role to play in this.

This foregrounds the question: once universal abstract norms and foundationalism are declared illusions and dominating practices, how will evaluative criteria and norms be established? What protects us from moral free fall, or free for all? This question reflects and suggests something of the vertigo and risk felt when advocating moving beyond any form of totalising discourse in the shaping of society to something more contingent and provisional. It is what Attridge regarded as being enacted in Coetzee's novel *Age of Iron*; what he describes as 'an acute ethico-political trauma ... where every code of moral conduct has to be tested and justified afresh in terms of the specific context in which it is being evoked' (Attridge 2004a:110).

Social Imaginaries

In this thesis, then, alerted by Chopp's call for the disruption of social imaginaries by poetics of testimony, I recall Chopp's use of the term 'social imaginary', thus: she says that this genre, (poetics of testimony), 'provides a strong critique of dominant culture practices and provokes refigurations of the social imaginary, that is, *the basic presuppositions, metaphors and rules that frame cultural operations*' (Chopp, 2001:57 emphasis added).

In exploring current understandings of the concept of the social imaginary in this work, I employ the thinking of Charles Taylor and others on 'new social imaginaries'. Taylor's own definition has been described in this way,

> For him, the social imaginary is the thinking shared within a society by ordinary people, the common understanding that makes common practices possible and legitimizes them. The social imaginary is implicit and *normative*; it derives from the usual, the quotidian, from everyday attitudes, behaviours and opinion making. It flows from events and ideas, the realities that citizens live with most intimately and immediately' (Arthurs, 2003:580 emphasis added).

Arthurs emphasises that for Taylor '...the social imaginary carries within it "deeper normative notions and images" (Taylor, 2002:106). It is these collective "self-understandings" (Taylor, 2002:91) that are constitutive of a society' (Arthurs, 2003:580). Arthurs emphasises that, as I noted in reviewing Taylor's thinking, these new social imaginaries are not seen as being static. She also notes that the social imaginary, as construed by Taylor is 'rooted very deeply in ... democratic traditions' it is 'decidedly Western and even specifically North American' (Arthurs, 2003:580). She goes on to identify the need in studying the social imaginary to be aware of 'the limits of any particular imaginary', as well as 'the importance of identifying multiple imaginaries' (Arthurs, 2003:581).

Also commenting on the theorizing of such new social imaginaries, Candace Vogler offers this definition,

> ...*imaginaries* are complex systems of presumption – patterns of forgetfulness and attentiveness – that enter subjective experience as the expectation that things will make sense generally (i.e. in terms not wholly idiosyncratic). Accordingly, action-guiding, personal answers to ethical questions will turn on some mode of general sense-making – What should *I* do? and How should *I* live? can be restated as What should one (in my circumstances) do? or How

> should one (in my circumstances) live? - my circumstances are both mine and not mine alone (Vogler, 2002:625).

It does not appear to 'make sense' to many people that violent and abusive acts happen, whether it be in concentration camps or in family homes behind closed doors. My concern lies with whether such shared understandings, things that 'make sense' in society, really take account of the underside, the hidden facet of social imaginaries. If *habitual* acts within societies turn out to be domestic abuse, incest, child abuse, denigration of and discrimination against women, which I believe is the case and that the evidence bears this out, even while such societies apparently advocate gender equality, are there then discourses embedded within them and shared understandings that support the actual misogynistic practices that exist? An example of such a discrepancy between what is advocated at one level of society and actual practice might be a society in which, for example, educational initiatives might try to inculcate gender equality and good practice but jokes circulating among young people might be full of 'dumb blonde' motifs. Is what needs to be disrupted within societies by poetics, as Chopp suggests, if not by other means, something deeply held, the understanding of what it means to be men and women in that society or even the very opposition of the categories of men and women as the basic hierarchical binary which underpins the structure of so many societies?

I have understood that the social imaginary of a society displays certain social practices that are based in shared values and understandings, and I conclude that since in every society there is violence against women, then shared understandings and constructions of gender such that women form the lesser half of the gender binary, must underpin this violence. The compelling question then is how such understandings might change, and for the purpose of this thesis, how literature might play a part in this.

Poetics of Testimony

Recognising the need for the disruption of social imaginaries at a profound level, I assessed the kind of literature/poetics that might effect such disruption. Chopp has advocated the power of poetics of testimony as a disruptive force. Testimony, such as

that of witnesses to the Holocaust and of sexual abuse survivors, certainly has a role in bringing into the public domain the experiences of those stricken by such trauma. According to Chopp, 'The poetics of testimony ...is fundamentally concerned with human and earthly survival and transformation' (Chopp, 2001:57).

'Poetics of testimony', however, is not simply a straightforward narrative accounting of experience. As I touched on in Chapter Two, putting faith in the power of narrative as a vehicle for conveying the reality of traumatic experience is not adequate to the situations under consideration. While the opportunity to testify to suffering fulfils an important therapeutic role for survivors and the knowledge of what exists beneath the apparently civilised surface of society is important for shaping practices within society, as I have discussed, not all experience can be shaped into a fluent narrative. As Mark Ledbetter says in his book *Victims and the Postmodern Narrative, or doing violence to the body* 'We assume that narrative's goal, whether fictive or lived, is to create a coherent world, that at least in hindsight, is predictable and therefore safe, if not comfortable.' He goes on, 'Each moment in narrative, as well as in our lives, calls for closure, a reassuring sense that things, events, problems have reached a solution (Ledbetter, 1996:2)

The shaping of experience into a coherent narrative can in fact be a concealment of the actual experience and can lead to a manipulation of the truth. Ledbetter again points out that narratives have a political dimension and the construction of a narrative can suggest that there is only one story to tell, whereas, with every accounting,

> ... there is not 'the' story but rather a multitude of stories, within one seemingly singular narrative, myriad voices wishing to be heard, though silenced by the convenience of a larger narrative, a master plot that is neat, seductively ideal, but whose construct is in the hands of the privileged and powerful and whose imposition is necessary to maintain and perpetuate that privilege and power (Ledbetter, 1996:5).

He concludes that 'master plots' only exist by virtue of what they suppress. This reveals a need for a form of testimony that allows for myriad voices to be heard, and for what is suppressed by the 'master plot' to surface.

Part of this thesis has been concerned to show the factors that hinder or shape the emergence of testimony. In writing of the experiences of the Korean 'comfort women' (Graham 1998), Elaine Graham has pointed out the importance of gender in this respect. While appreciating much in the work of Arthur Frank, who has written about the way in which stories are constructed and told about serious illness, Graham offers this critique. She says

> ... his work ignores the extent to which the passage into speech of the wounded storyteller is always already circumscribed by concealed dynamics of gender and race. Some stories get told, but others, Frank's chaos narratives remain on the margins of acceptable speech because the prevailing system of gendered and racialized privilege renders their bearers mute and invisible (Graham, 1998:255).

She goes on 'In particular women – their bodies and voices – are so fundamentally absent from patriarchy that they cannot occupy the same narrative spaces as men (Graham, 1998:255).

Much of the experience of gender specific violence that I am concerned with might be characterised as creating, using Frank's term, 'chaos narratives'. 'The chaos narrative represents stories which lack any coherence or resolution within the paradigm of restitution' (Frank, 1995:98 in Graham, 1998:257). According to Graham chaos narratives are virtually untellable, 'representing merely a hole in the narrative that cannot be filled' (Graham, 1998:257). As Frank expresses it 'The story traces the edges of a wound that can only be told around. Words suggest its rawness, but that wound is so much of the body, its insults agonies and losses that words necessarily fail' (Frank, 1995:98 in Graham, 1998:257). This also, in my experience, describes the difficulty in the surfacing of witness to much of the violence done to women. This struggle, the problem of conveying the unimaginable, I have shown to be exemplified in Celan's later work.

Chopp then says of 'poetics of testimony' that it is not just poetry but rather those discourses 'that speak the unspeakable and tell of the suffering and hope of particular

communities who have not been authorized to speak' (Chopp 2001:61) One of the key points about poetics of testimony as understood by Chopp that it does not deal in reasoned argument, but rather seeks to 'refigure, to re-imagine and refashion the world' (Chopp, 2001:61).

In Chopp's understanding, much of which is drawn from Felman's work, testimony is a discourse that refers to a reality outside the ordinary order of things. 'The language of testimonies asks us to hear this other as the first and most indisputable claim of existence. It is this radical otherness to which we are summoned by testimony' (Chopp, 2001:62). Here Chopp employs language that echoes Levinas's concept of the 'face' of the other imposing obligation. She claims that 'Testimony invokes a moral claim – it is from someone to someone about something. Decision is called for, a change in reality is required' (Chopp, 2001:63). She continues, 'The poetics of testimony places all theories even contemporary theories of culture on trial for their moral responsibility to engage this reverence for life' (Chopp, 2001:63). In the final chapter of this thesis I suggested that such questioning of all totalising discourse is what is accomplished in Coetzee's fiction, and I would characterise it as a poetics of testimony. While I acknowledge throughout this thesis that such a putting into question of *all* that totalises the other is what might be necessary to cause a shift in social imaginaries that currently underpin violence against women, I know that such a move is without guarantees and constitutes something of a 'wager' on the potential power of poetics.

Although I will discuss Chopp's theological orientation in more detail below, I am interested in the fact that she regards *theology* as needing to be responsive to the moral summons enacted by testimony. She claims that this changes the nature of theology and that ' The category for defining or ordering theology has changed from discourse in relation to reason to discourse in response to the moral summons in testimonies'(Chopp, 2001:66). She also sees theology as involved in the refiguration of social imaginaries through "poetics" which, following Ricoeur, she sees as essential to theology. She says that

> The poetics of theological discourse is about the conversion of the imaginary, which works not only by stirring up " the sedimented universe of conventional

> ideas," but by shaking up "the order of persuasion" and thus generating convictions as much as settling or ruling over controversies (Ricoeur, 1989:143 in Chopp, 2001:66).

Towards the end of this conclusion I will look at the operation of theological reflection and literature and suggest they are both potential tools for disrupting social imaginaries.

Reviewing where this journey has led, I note that the motif of silence, voice, voicelessness, mother-tongue, father-tongue, tongue-lessness, has been woven through it. There has been allusion to the power that can be inherent in silence in its resistance to the appropriation of voice. This theme has run alongside that of needing to give voice to those who have been oppressed and abused. There is a tension inherent here that has surfaced in a number of ways in this thesis, between the need to give expression to the hidden, the denied, the underside, the unsayable, of language, of culture, of pain, and the problem that in that very process the voice of the other may be silenced or co-opted, totalised or colonised.

Language

Discussion of the power of the poetics of testimony to disrupt social imaginaries leads to the question of how this might be accomplished and how the power of poetic language and particularly metaphor might manifest itself.

Having engaged with Kristeva and Levinas's understandings of the operation of language, language, particularly poetic language has began to seem a much more complex, even magical, creature than I had imagined, with a power to open fissures and cracks in accepted discourses. It has become apparent that poetics of testimony can disrupt not just such patriarchal and colonising discourses as have weighed so heavily on the marginalised, but all discourses, even those of history, of the Enlightenment, of liberal humanism and feminism, all that have the potential to colonise the other, even if with benign intention.

Kristeva, as I have noted, stressed the revolutionary potential of poetic language with her model, whether taken literally or not, of the infusion of semiotic elements within poetic language (as well as in maternity and psychoanalysis) to disrupt the structure of discourse. I have indicated however, in my discussion of Kristeva's work in Chapter Three that there are questions as to how sustained such disruption can be.

Levinas's project of ethics as first philosophy was chiefly concerned with the relationship of Self to Other and for the need for the Self to be moved to obligation by the face of the Other. In this he offers no guarantees, presence before the face of the other should call forth obligation, but history, not least recent history, shows that this often does not happen. John Caputo writes on the poetics of obligation in response to Levinas's work. He writes of the claims that suffering bodies and afflicted flesh make upon us but says that they are 'frail and finite' and that all that can be done is 'to lend these claims an ear, to provide them with an idiom, to magnify their voice, to let them ring like bells across the surface of our lives and to discourage cruelty'. After that he says 'I do not know what else to do' (Caputo, 1993:209). So, Levinas offers no guarantees of non-violent responses to the appeal of the 'face' of the other. (recalling that in my understanding, women have been the ultimate Other, and thus vulnerable to violence) Again, as Caputo says 'We have to do with competing poetics, poetics of obligation and poetics of phallo-aggressive machismo,' and ' the flesh of the Other is no less what triggers my blow....The flesh of the Other is never neutral'(Caputo, 1993:215).

In his later work, with his understanding of the amphibological nature of language and the way in which the Saying of language (the address to the other that evokes obligation), disrupts the Said (the structuring, categorizing, containing, totalising, aspect of language), Levinas also came to see *language* as central and as the bearer of the ethical.

Chopp in her book *The Power to Speak,* expands on this link between the functioning of language and, language as a political activity linking it to feminist theology (see Chopp 1991:3). She holds that '..feminist theology is an activity of and in language and discourse, an activity that enables the privileging of multiplicity and difference even in our speaking and hearing.' This necessitates 'attention to the nature of

language (how language works) and discourse (the historical forms of our language)' (Chopp, 1991:12).

She sees the role of language as follows, stressing its importance in the constitution of gender identity and recognising the possibility for change that this allows.

> Language serves as both the material and the frame for structural and cultural debates about the role of women, affirmative action, and issues such as birth control, abortion and child care. Yet language is also the site where our subjectivity is formed; we think and feel, we experience the world according to the categories given to us by language. What it is to be a woman or a man varies in different cultures and at different times and places, but these definitions are prior to the individual, indeed, they allow the individual to become man or woman in the acceptable modes of that culture (Chopp, 1991:12).

As has been emphasised in this thesis, it is possible for such discourses to change, to be displaced or for language to be 'interrupted' and transformed and Chopp believes that such a change of discourse will allow different forms of subjectivity to appear (see Chopp, 1991:13). It is such different forms of subjectivity for men and women that I believe may play a part in the diminution of gender-specific violence.

For Chopp as for Kristeva, 'Language bridges the gap between individual subjectivity, cultural practices and societal institutions, providing a way to cross the mysterious waters of the norms, values and principles that operate in various dimensions, places, and ways throughout the social-symbolic order' (Chopp, 1991:13-14).

The social symbolic order that she speaks of here appears to be very close to descriptions of the social imaginary and again she emphasises the possibilities for change and transformation effected through the operation of both the structural and symbolic aspects of language. It is to both these characteristics of language that I paid attention in my discussion of the writing of Coetzee.

For Chopp then, language can birth new meanings, new discourses, new signifying practices. She claims that

> Though there is a social symbolic order, an ordering of language, subjectivity and politics, such ordering is not totalitarian in the day-to-day life of society. Around the social symbolic order are margins and fissures that allow language and thus social-symbolic order to be corrected, changed, subverted, interrupted, and transformed (Chopp, 1991:14).

My overall philosophical project is concerned with the construction of the Self and the Other and the damage done to women who consistently find themselves in the position of abjected other, and with the possibility of cultural change. I am, as I have said, also concerned to find an appropriate and adequate theological response to this issue. I will continue to be guided by Chopp and follow the trajectory of her thought to explore what kind of theological thinking engages adequately with the compelling problem which is my starting point and chief concern.

Appropriate theological models

Chopp's theological project is in large part the proclamation and promotion of emancipatory transformation of society and emancipatory praxis which she sees as embodied by feminist theology.

Given that the starting point for this thesis is a compelling social issue, it might be thought that a theological methodological approach such as critical correlation, designed to bring such contemporary issues into conversation with traditional theological resources might be an appropriate theological response. One of Chopp's earlier pieces of writing is a chapter in *Formation and Reflection: The Promise of Practical Theology* edited by Lewis Mudge and James Poling (1987). In this paper she sets theology employing a revised correlation method (the putting into productive conversation a compelling social problem and the resources of the Christian tradition, scripture, ritual etc) as framed by Tillich, over against that of liberation theologies, among which she includes feminist theology, and gauges their comparative potential for emancipatory transformation in society. In the course of this comparison, which

she admits is not exactly comparing like with like, Chopp highlights what for her is the nature and purpose of feminist theology and just how appropriate it is as a response to profound social problems such as the one with which I am engaged.

She claims that there are three areas of difficulty inherent in the revised correlation method, with which she engages here: firstly the way in which experience is characterised and whose experience is considered, secondly the way in which tradition is understood, and finally how the correlation between tradition and experience occurs. As often highlighted in feminist theory, the first problem lies with the interpretation of any particular experience as common human experience, which in the past has seen the elevation of the experience of a certain group of men, delineated as universal experience (see Chopp, 1987:130).

Chopp goes on to highlight problems with the other conversation partner, tradition. As she asserts 'One awareness that feminist theology can never avoid is that tradition is a living history of social practices' (Chopp, 1987:130) and it has been well demonstrated, not least by my own engagement with contemporary church practices with regard to gender violence and discrimination, that practices within church tradition have been themselves damaging to women.[92]

Reviewing the way in which feminist theologies differ from those using a revised correlation method, Chopp characterises liberation theologies, including feminist theologies, as those that 'attempt to speak for those people that liberal Christianity has ignored, forgotten and even oppressed'(Chopp, 1987:121). Their starting point is not just engaging with 'the problems of the bourgeois non-believer' but with the questions asked by the "nonperson" and the "nonhuman" which, by contrast, have to do with the economic, the social and the political (see Chopp, 1987:127-129).

With regard to tradition, and pertinent to this thesis, Chopp asks

> What happens when the tradition simply cannot be a source for theological reflection; when the only meanings one can retrieve from it are those of the

[92] For example the female Dean of a Theological College in Kenya described the use of the Bible in Africa as 'a stick that is used to beat women' (in private conversation).

> terrible misogyny that Christianity has conceived, enforced, secured and policed in regard to women? What if, as some feminist theologians believe, we cannot be "at home" in the tradition? The method of correlation begins by assuming the at-homeness of tradition, and while it may use experience to correct tradition, it cannot in principle, even entertain the question of radical systemic distortion (Chopp, 1987:131).

If in revised correlation, *experience* does not fully include that of women and of other marginalised groups, and if *tradition* is irrelevant and compromised, there is also the problem of the method of correlation. For Chopp liberation theology does not begin with 'some predetermined assumption about the essence of common human experience or about the privileged status of tradition: it begins with the need to approach different, varied complex realities and a willingness to privilege human emancipation and enlightenment over tradition' (Chopp, 1987:131-132). Chopp would wish to designate the method employed by liberation theologies, 'a critical praxis correlation' which for her 'includes a de-ideologization of scriptures, a pragmatic interpretation of experience, a critical theory of emancipation and enlightenment and a social theory to transform practice' (Chopp 1987: 132).

With regards to politics, Chopp asserts that liberation theologies are not simply concerned with 'large ethical and political theories *about* power' but more with ' the capillaries and daily practices *of* power'. It is the "unintended" consequences of social practices that 'are more repressive than any ethical-political theory could ever intend' (Chopp, 1987:134). This distinction resonates with that which Coetzee makes between ethics and politics as discussed in Chapter Six.

It is not my principle concern here to critique revised correlation methodology in theological reflection but I have employed Chopp's engagement with it to the extent that it throws into relief the characteristics of feminist theology that are relevant to theological reflection on the issue of violence against women, in its ubiquitous yet unacknowledged nature; that is the foregrounding of women's experience, a critique of tradition, and the affirmation of the importance of theological reflection being integrated with emancipatory praxis.

Women's experience

I have noted Chopp's advocacy of the surfacing of women's voices and experience as a crucial way of bringing about desired change. She says that women's voices are needed to

> revise the social and symbolic rules of language, transforming the law of ordered hierarchy in language, in subjectivity, and in politics into a grace of rich plenitude for human flourishing....women must find ways of resisting the codes, the concepts , the values , and the structures that are subject to this two term system. In this fashion women may not so much balance or equalize the hierarchy as change its monotheistic ordering of the "one" as opposed to the "other" into a multiplicity, allowing differences and connections instead of constantly guaranteeing identities and oppositions (Chopp, 1991:2).

Chopp cites the possibilities for new ways of being human made possible in the surfacing of women's long hidden experience and in feminist theology's expression of it. She says

> What the variety of discourses of feminist theologies share in common is the desire to speak of freedom, to envision new ways of being human, to speak of the desires of women and to speak of what women have known, what have been women's burdens, and what women experience as the "other" of man (Chopp, 1991:11).

Since my concern is with the violence that *women* experience it might be thought that the literature and poetic language that I am turning to that might accomplish the necessary and desired disruption of the social imaginary would be that drawn from and shaped by women, a telling of women's own experience by women themselves. While the surfacing and acknowledgment of this experience is an essential factor in the disruption of paternalistic discourse, in this thesis I have followed the lead of a number of French feminists and suggested a parallel approach to the foregrounding of women's experience per se. This consists of being attentive to literature that by its

formal characteristics disputes authorial authority, confounds readers' expectations, disrupts narrative consistency and questions the authority of history.

In turning to literature I have also become more aware of the theorizing of space opened up 'the feminine' in writing. This thesis has not entailed an in-depth exploration of this space which has come, initially in the work of Lacan, Derrida and Lyotard, as Walton expresses it, 'to signify the last unconquered territory outside philosophical regulation from which it is possible to speak a new word' (Walton, 2000:15) Thinking with regard to 'the feminine' has not only been the domain of male theorists such as those noted above. Women theorists such as Kristeva and Irigaray have elaborated on its potential as a space for the emergence of all that is excluded from traditional discourse. 'Feminine writing' opens the way for experiencing the repressed of the master narratives and does so principally through its form which enacts the disturbance and disruption of readers' expectations. Thus in language use, 'symbolism, metaphors, literary tropes and devices, intertextual references, rhythm, rhyme, fragmentation of text, adherence to or rejection of grammatical conventions, neologisms, etc' (Walton, 2007a:171) all operate within literature in order that this occur. I have drawn attention to the way in which even texts of theory that I have engaged with have done this because of the form that they take. Although this space is imaged in gender terms as 'feminine', symbolising as in Levinas's early work, absolute alterity, male writers are not excluded from 'feminine' writing in these terms, and I have discovered in Coetzee a writer whose work as I have demonstrated, performs in this way, in a rigorous and complex fashion.

Imaging the way forward

One question that arises in a thesis much concerned with the operation and possibilities inherent in metaphor might be how the disruption of any social imaginary and prevailing dominant discourses might be imaged and spoken of. In her book, *Saving Work* (1995) Chopp offers certain images drawn from what has traditionally been women's work in the domestic domain, for doing the kind of theology that leads to emancipatory transformation which she champions. She says,

> Theology no longer uncovers unchangeable foundations or hands down the cognitive truths of tradition or discloses the classics or even figures out the rules of faith as suggested by modern and contemporary metaphors of doing the work of theology. Rather quilting, weaving and constructing become the focus of theological work as a communal process of bringing "scraps" of materials used elsewhere and joining them in new ways (Chopp, 1995:73).

While agreeing with what she says of theology here, my own preference, accepting the disruptive potential and possibilities inherent in poesis as argued by Chopp, is that more robust metaphors such as hammering and chiselling, levering open the cracks, breaking, fracturing, exposing the hollow places behind the stone, squeezing through the gaps, might better serve to give a sense of what is required of a theological method or model addressing such an issue as ongoing violence against women. More subtly, as I explore below, Charles Winquist uses the metaphor of infection and contagion as a way of imaging the radical change of substance that might affect dominant discourses and thus open the way for real change to happen which could impact on the problem of violence against women. This metaphor is helpful in providing a sense of the slow but unstoppable nature of change that I am suggesting might be effected through literature.

Chopp also speaks of reconstructing:

> In the image of reconstructing a double sense is invoked. In the first sense, reconstructing work means fashioning new spaces of survival and flourishing. And in the second sense, reconstructing involves the role of the imagination, the active sense of the theologian shaping as well as being shaped by Christian praxis (Chopp, 1995:75).

While I appreciate her call for new spaces of survival and flourishing, and her assertion that the imagination has an important role to play in shaping Christian praxis, I am wary of advocating praxis that is anything less than fluid and able to be responsive to fresh challenges. This thesis, especially in engagement with the fiction of Coetzee has signalled the value of being able to challenge *all* dominant discourses both those that are patriarchal and those such as liberal humanism, that might totalise

the other. Being always aware of the possible totalising effect of what is constructed, or indeed reconstructed, would seem to lead to the kind of human flourishing that Chopp proclaims.

Poetics and Revelation

This thesis embodies the hope that it is possible to shatter existing discourses that underpin the oppression of women in all societies, and open the way for new visions, new ways of being, the bringing to birth of new worlds where at least there is the chance of new ways for women and men to relate to one another. This raises the issue, from a theological perspective, of what might be the nature of any such new ways of knowing and being and what they might have to do with God. Remaining, for the moment, with a traditional theological concept framed in such a way as to express this openness to new ways and new life, I turn to the thinking of Rowan Williams on revelation. He makes the claim that 'In spite of everything we go on saying 'God'' (Williams, 2000 in Graham, Walton and Ward, 2007:24). He offers a model of *revelation* as 'knowledge that is capable of transcending the containment of human discourse - a source of authority that can be recognized as subverting or disrupting human certainties in the name of a reality that is not reducible to a purely anthropocentric frame of reference' (Williams, 2000 in Graham, Walton and Ward, 2007:23-24). He characterises revelation as 'an invitation, an invocation to a new way of thinking and acting. Revelation is what takes us out of ourselves, disrupts and disturbs the taken-for-grantedness of everyday knowledge, and points to a world that surpasses anything we could have created out of our own self interest' (Graham, Walton and Ward, 2007:24). Rather than giving us pre-packaged certainties, revelation acts rather as a paradigm shift, opens up new understandings, stimulating the imagination (see Graham, Walton and Ward 2007:24).The question remains, how does this new insight foster creative living (in Chopp's terminology, emancipatory transformation)?

It will be apparent that there are strong resonances in this kind of language with Ricoeur's work on metaphor and indeed Williams cites an essay by Ricoeur to illustrate his point.

> Paul Ricoeur … has attempted to link the concept [of revelation] with a project for a 'poetics' which will spell out the way in which a poetic text, by offering a frame of linguistic reference other than the normal descriptive/referential function of language 'restores to us that participation - in or belonging – to an order of things which precedes our capacity to oppose ourselves to things taken as objects opposed to a subject' (Williams, 2000 in Graham, Walton and Ward 2007: 26).

He goes on, in a passage that highlights much of what I have addressed in this thesis, to say,

> The truth with which the poetic text is concerned is not verification, but manifestation … the text displays or even embodies the reality with which it is concerned simply by witness or 'testimony' (to use Ricoeur's favoured word). It displays a 'possible world', a reality in which my human reality can also find itself: and in inviting me into its world, the text breaks open and extends my own possibilities (Williams, 2000 in Graham, Walton and Ward 2007:26).

In Williams understanding this, for Ricoeur, 'points to poetry as exercising a *revelatory* function' in other words it 'manifests an initiative that is not ours in inviting us to a world we did not make' (Williams, 2000 in Graham, Walton, Ward 2007:26). This implies for revelation what has been claimed for poetic language throughout this thesis, that 'revelation in this account is to do with what is *generative* in our experience - events or transactions in our language that break existing frames of reference and initiate new possibilities of life'. It 'extends rather than limits the range of ambiguity and conflict in language' and it 'poses fresh questions rather than answering old ones' (Williams, 2000 in Graham, Walton and Ward, 2007:26). In the interests of the emancipatory transformation in the lives of women, here again it would seem important that anything seen as 'revelation' does not come taken to be an overarching source of authority but is also always subject itself to fresh questions.

Literature as theology as literature?

In a challenging chapter in her book *Imagining Theology,* Walton reviews the question of the possibility of art itself as a form of emancipatory praxis, 'having potency in its own right'(Walton, 2007b:51) equivalent in effect to political activism. She is concerned with the question of 'what earthly use is literature' (Walton 2007b: 50)

She begins however by asking what earthly use is theological writing, as also 'a form of writing which does not employ empirical and realistic conventions'(Walton 2007b:50). To explore this question, Walton turns, among others, to the work of theologian Charles Winquist who would see theology itself as a form of discursive practice, which unlike other forms, breaks the frame of existing discourse. Drawing from his writing in *Desiring Theology* (1995), she says that Winquist asks if

> ...there is a 'singularity about speaking or writing the name of God?'(Winquist 1995:85) The effect of this utterance is not, as it might have been in the past, to make a direct intervention that transforms dominant discourse but rather to taint, infect or pollute such discourse, thus rendering it corrupted from within' (Winquist, 1995:85 in Walton, 2007b:53-54).

Walton concludes that '[t]heology in this perspective becomes a transient, homeless discourse which 'inhabits the edges and cracks of the dominant culture. It is a nomad discipline, wandering, wondering and erring'' (Winquist, 1995:133 in Walton, 2007b: 54). For Winquist, the role of the theologian is in responding to the spaces created in this discourse, in the 'ever unsettled reality of text production... [t]here are always spaces, discursive and nondiscursive spaces that although they are not sanctioned or proper to a dominant discourse can be inhabited by theological interrogations. I am suggesting that theology can insinuate itself into dominant culture' (Winquist, 1995:133 in Walton, 2007b:54).

I have commented on the images that Winquist conjures up here of contagion and infection and Walton contends that theology has 'effected a seepage and contagion which has stained and infected the work of many contemporary thinkers' (Walton,

2007b:54). The question posed by Winquist in this book is much the same as that asked by Williams, 'What cultural disruption does writing the name of God produce?' However it is possible to turn the question round. Walton goes on to point out that '... while theologians are using literary theory to explore the importance of theological writing, this body of theory itself has taken a decidedly theological turn' (Walton, 2007b:54). What if the question were what kind of God does writing culturally disruptive literature, such as Coetzee's fiction, reveal (or construct)?

Exploring what she terms the 'theological turn' in literary theory, Walton draws, like Williams, on the work of Ricoeur on metaphor. She says 'In Ricoeur's thinking this image of the metaphor as the place where impossible elements combine to generate creative energy, comes to represent what can be achieved through literature and imaginative thinking.' She goes on to make clear that for Ricoeur, 'What literature does best is to open us to what does not exist, what is not true and what has not yet been thought. [93] As extended metaphoric utterance literature has a world destroying and world-creating function' (Walton, 2007b:55). She concludes that, 'The metaphor draws us into an encounter with that which it manifests. We are not pointed towards a fact or proposition; we are confronted with something closer to a *revelation* or *epiphany*' (Walton, 2007b:56, emphasis added).

Highly significant for this work driven by a concern over violent domination predicated on difference is what Walton sees as 'The rich image of the metaphor [in Ricoeur's understanding] which *incorporates differences without domination* and has been credited with restoring to us a primordial world in which the divide that currently exists between subject and object is overcome' (Walton, 2007b:56). Crucially with regard to this thesis she notes that for Ricoeur metaphor involves us in a process which detaches us 'from the process of knowing by objectifying' moving us to 'a process of knowing by self bestowal and participation' (Riceour in McIntosh 1998:132, in Walton, 2007b:56). She goes on to characterise metaphor, as 'a site of a meeting which defies the subject/object order of the regulated world' and says it 'can also be interpreted as the space in which we are enabled to make a privileged encounter with alterity' (Walton, 2007b:56).

[93] This echoes Rubem Alves's use of a term from Valéry 'What are we without the help of that which does not exist? (Alves, 1990:35).

In this chapter, Walton draws on the work of two of the writers that I have engaged with in this thesis, Kristeva and Celan, and shows that for each poetic language opens the way for something in the nature of revelation or an epiphany. She notes Kristeva's conviction that 'what is happening in the processes that constitute poetic language can appropriately be described as the encroachment of *the sacred* into a world that fears its ambivalent power' (Walton, 2007b:57, emphasis added) and goes on to say of Celan, '[h]e argues that poetry is concerned to articulate what is normally silenced, or which takes the breath away. It makes testimony on behalf of that which is alien to language and that which culture would rather dispose of and forget'(Walton, 2007b:57)

Celan, like Kristeva associates that which is abjected in this way with *the sacred* He expresses this in his Meridian speech in a passage I quoted in Chapter Two.

> But I think- and this thought can scarcely come as a surprise to you – I think that it has always belonged to the expectations of the poem, in precisely this manner to speak in the cause of the strange – no, I can no longer use this word – in precisely this manner to speak *in the cause of an Other* – who knows, perhaps in the cause of a *wholely Other* (Celan 1978:35-36 in Walton, 2007b: 57-58)

Walton contends that Celan, like Ricoeur, celebrates the potential that the poem presents to re-enter a primordial world in which the subject/ object divide that sustains the factuity of everyday life is set aside and another form of knowledge is revealed *'in the mystery of an encounter'* (1978:37)' (Walton, 2007b:58). Walton argues that poets and philosophers have thus been moved to use *sublime* language to speak of the politically disruptive impact of poetic and literary language. The question then arises as to whether literature, or at least some kinds of literature now 'operate' in a very similar way to theological writing, or at least some kinds of theological writing, only doing so without the name/image /concept of 'God' [94]

[94] Coetzee does not profess to a Christian faith, or did not at the point of an interview with Attwell in *Doubling the Point* in which he says 'But here I stepping onto precarious ground, or precarious water; I had better stop. As for grace, no, regrettably no: I am not a Christian, or not yet' (Coetzee, 1992:250).

Such thinking is developed in Winquist's latest and last book. Carl Raschke, in the Preface he has written to *The Surface of the Deep* by Winquist, claims that in this book, Winquist shows theology is itself a mode of deconstruction, and deconstruction is a mode of theology (see Raschke, 2003:xiv). I would contend that he thus claims a theological character and function for deconstructive literature.

Raschke goes on in his preface to outline what he understands to be the current state of theological thinking. He says theology is 'a thought that has learned to think what is unthought within thought itself. Theology can now be thought only in this unthought fashion because theology as a domain of thought has come to an end. We think at the "end of theology"' (Raschke, 2003:xv).

With allusions to language and silence such that have woven through this thesis, Raschke writes of the emancipating role of deconstruction. He says,

> Theology desires the end of theology, since all desire in the final analysis is for what shatters every strategy of thinking. If theology ultimately seeks the name of the father as Lacan tells us, a "desiring theology" calls out for the *nom de mere.* This curious name of silence is inscribed on the very façade of representation, which we know as the world's "nomenclature". It is the Platonic *chora* which Derrida in writing at the end of philosophy finds as the immanent *misrule* of language, which makes the emancipating role of deconstruction feasible (Raschke, 2003:xvi) .

Winquist himself lays out what he sees as the end and 'ultimate return' (Raschke 2003:xvii) of theology, he claims that

> Theology harbors no secret knowledge and has no access to a hidden order of things. It has become like a nomad wandering over the surface of the deep. But what it did not surrender in its self-denial was its unrestricted interrogative form. Its conceptual formulations instantiate a radical negativity simply by being thought. Questions about what we take seriously without any reservation

> may not have answers, but they transgress the boundaries of any claims to totality or closure (Winquist, 2003: 100).

This is very much what I understand writing such as that by Coetzee to be performing. In a passage that comes very close to the arguments of this thesis, Winquist claims that

> The surface of the ordinary world looks different in the context of unrestricted questioning. We will still be reading a text but the text will be marked and sometimes remarked by fissures wrought by limiting questions, poetic indirections and figures of brokenness. From its marginal position theological in-verbalization and inscription will be a supplement to ordinary thinking. We might even think of theology as a supplementary evaluation of otherness that is present only by its absence in the textual articulation of experience. It is in its postmodern articulation a method of hesitation on the surface, the fold, the skin, the appearance of reality so that there can be an acute recognition of our being there in the world. There is in this recognition a consent to an otherness of reality - a primal sense of nature - that is always in danger of being repressed and exploited by systems of thinking (Winquist, 2003:100).

He adds that '[t]heological defamiliarization can be understood as an ethical experiment in *letting things be in their otherness*. It works against the conformation of the natural to the idealization of intellectual systems. It is in particular a lever of intervention from within language that prevents systems of totalization from pretending closure' (Winquist, 2003:101 emphasis added).

In this way totalitarian praxis, such as the abuse and domination of women, is denied its ideal justification (see Winquist, 2003:101). I would argue that both some theology and certain literature accomplish this.

In her previously cited chapter of *Imagining Theology,* Walton ultimately asks if the claims that might be made on behalf of literature and theological writing, that they perform a disruption of dominant discourses such as to actually change the world, can be sustained at all (see Walton, 2007b:59). She also claims, quite rightly, that politics

does not alone of itself change the world, and suggests the need for writing and activism to be partners in this process of challenge to damaging discourses.

In this I would concur. I am fully aware of and supportive of the need for political work, educational initiatives, campaigning and consciousness raising within both church and society with regard to ongoing violence against women, but alongside these things I put such faith as I have for emancipatory transformation, in theology that performs deconstruction and the deconstruction wrought by literature such as that written by Coetzee and others, I pin my faith to 'a space where words and their dark unconscious manifestations contribute to the weaving of the world's unbroken flesh' (Kristeva, 1993b:5 in Walton, 2007a:168).

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