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SPEAKING OF GENDER, LANGUAGE AND IDENTITY: WRITING THE PERSONAL

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**SPEAKING OF GENDER, LANGUAGE AND IDENTITY:
WRITING THE PERSONAL**

by
BARBARA BRIDGER

A thesis submitted to the University of Plymouth
in partial fulfilment for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

**FIELD OF WRITING
DARTINGTON COLLEGE OF ARTS**

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BARBARA LILIAN BRIDGER

SPEAKING OF GENDER, LANGUAGE AND IDENTITY: WRITING THE PERSONAL

This thesis features a range of texts that exemplify my practice. They include experimental prose, poetry, hybrid forms of writing that merge theory and practice, and scripts for live performance and digital film. To these examples I apply an autobiographical writing method, one that simultaneously reflects and creates, in an enquiry designed to uncover the detail and complexity of my writing motivation through a discursive account of its context.

In a process that acknowledges the centrality of language to the construction of female identity, I begin by exploring the importance of autobiography to both my writing and this thesis. Next I give an account of an artistic project, designed to identify and collect perspectives on the main areas of debate and concern. I then revisit the writing of significant gender theorists, including Julia Kristeva, Luce Irigaray and Helene Cixous. The sections that follow use two scripts for live performance to illustrate the 'predicament' of the female performer and the importance of myth to women's artistic practice.

My conclusion, and the thesis as a whole, is a demonstration of, and an enquiry into, a method of 'writing through'. This reflexive strategy questions how writing functions, how it responds to, and incorporates various influences. It attempts to understand how such a process, such writing, not only enquires into context, but also can impact on it, in a methodology less concerned with representing knowledge and more concerned with releasing it.

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At no time during the registration for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy has the author been registered for any other University award without prior agreement of the Graduate Committee.

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Live Performance:

SEVEN DAYS AND SEVEN NIGHTS OF MOURNING,
Studio 4, Dartington College of Arts (Gilgamesch Project), May, 2001

TRACINGS,
rehearsed reading, Dartington College Of Arts, June, 2002

AMERICA! AMERICA!
prose reading, Barbican, London
(Writers' Incorporated Awards Ceremony), October, 2002

THE TRUE AERIALIST, Studio One, Dartington College of Arts,
February, 2008

Digital Film:

BODYWORK , 18 mins. Black and White
The Phoenix, EXETER AND DEVON ARTS CENTRE,
One Short Night, Film Showcase, November, 2002

Small Film Festival, Johnson Centre Cinema, George Washington
University. November, 2004

AMERICA! AMERICA! 20 mins
The Phoenix, EXETER AND DEVON ARTS CENTRE,
tEX103 Text Festival, May 2003

WHAT IS IT YOU WISH TO SPEAK OF? 80 mins. Black and White
The Phoenix, EXETER AND DEVON ARTS CENTRE, *tEX105 Text
Festival*, May 2005

20 minute edited version
*Women Writing and Reading, Past Present, Local and Global
Conference*, Alberta University, Canada. May, 2007

Publications:

AMERICA! AMERICA! 1,766 words, prose
Leviathan Quarterly No. 5, (September 2002)

INDI...AH, 2,000 words, prose
Quality Women's Fiction 39 (2002) ISSN 1357 4914

COMPLEXITIES OF A SUPERHEROINE, 2000 words,
critical review- *The Frederica Quartet*, AS Byatt
Leviathan Quarterly No. 7 (March 2003)

MAD GANGSTERS, 650 words, prose
Orbis No. 129 (Summer 2004) ISSN 0300-4425

DISTANCE, prose 1,600 words
Feminist Review 78 (2004) ISBN 1-4039-4142-4

A LOOPED FOOTAGE, 4,105 words, prose
Tears In The Fence (January 2005) ISSN 0266 5817

MATERNAL INSTINCT, 2,500 words, prose
Other Voices, Vol.18, No.1 (Summer 2005) PM40033165 R10700

EVEN DEATH I THINK, 2,250 words, prose
Skrev Press, Anthology, Spiders And Flies (Autumn 2005)
ISBN 1-904646-30-1

driving home, 4,560 words, autobiographical prose
Texts Bones (Autumn 2005) ISBN 1 -904646-27-1

driving home 2, 830 words, autobiographical prose
Texts Bones (Summer 2006) ISBN 1-9046-31-X

THE TRUE AERIALIST, 3,240 words, prose version of play
Feminist Review, issue 84 (October 2006) ISBN 1-4039-4142-6

Mother I – VII, sequence of 7 poems
Tears In The Fence, issue 44 (Autumn 2006) ISSN 0266-5816

THE RULES OF THE REAL, 416 words, prose
Orbis, 139 (Winter 2006) ISSN 0300-4425

ON E.L. DOCTOROW, 1,170 words, critical review
Sweet Land Stories, E. L. Doctorow
The Warwick Review, Vol. 1 No. 1 (March 2007)

NEW WRITING BY WOMEN OF THE IRANIAN DIASPORA,
1,394 words, critical review, *Let Me Tell You Where I've Been*. Persis
M. Karim (ed.)
The Warwick Review, Vol. 1 No. 2 (October 2007)

A HOLDING SITUATION, 1,969 words, prose
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Awards

Prose Writer of the Year (2002) (Writers Incorporated)
Short-listed for Fish Prize (2002)
Short-listed for Asham Prize (2003)
Short-listed for Real Writer's Award (2004)
Short-listed for Raymond Carver Award (2005)

Presentations and Conferences Attended

Research Seminars

The following were given as part of the Dartington College of Arts programme of post-graduate research seminars:

BODYWORK (May 2003) Screening of digital film of the same name and reading, short prose, *America! America!*

WHAT IS IT YOU WISH TO SPEAK OF? (May 2005) Paper and excerpt from digital film of the same name.

THE SUBJECT WHO SPEAKS - Autobiography And Gender (May 2007) Paper and reading.

Conference Papers

THE/MY FEMALE VOICE (May 2004) Conference: *Art What is it Good For?* Dartington College of Arts.

TALK DANCING, Digital film + introduction, 20 minutes, Conference (May 2007) *Women Writing and Reading*, University of Alberta.

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Signed Barbara Bridger
Date 18th May 2008

Opening Words

In this research I take an autobiographical writing methodology, one that simultaneously reflects and creates, and use it to uncover the detail and complexity of my writing motivation through a discursive account of its context.

The whole is an experiment in reflexivity¹, testing the boundaries and operation of a practice-based model in a personal enquiry that also seeks to contribute to a wider understanding of the condition and context of contemporary women's writing.

I began 'writing' sections of this thesis early in the process and have continued throughout the five years leading to its submission. Consequently, this final thesis provides a record of my writing practice over that period. The writings included here reflect my developing understanding and thinking. They also come in a variety of modes. Some sections may read as experimental prose, whereas others may resemble more conventional literary criticism. There is poetry, prose, scripts for live performance and digital film and writing that operates between commentary, fiction and autobiography. The relationship between text and commentary and theory and practice is in question throughout. The selected texts and my methodology of 'writing through'² are employed to release new knowledge and new poetic forms.

¹ See p13-16 for a discussion of reflexivity.

² See further discussion of my definition of 'writing through' on p16 and in 'Revisiting Écriture Féminine' p131-132, where I refer to it as 'a methodology less concerned with representing knowledge and more concerned with producing it'.

All central texts are contained in the body of the submission. To give perspective on this writing, I also refer to other work. Some of this was written before 2002. These historical texts give information about the processes leading to the production of the central texts and a selection of the most relevant is included in the Appendices.

In the overall organisation of my thesis, the section 'Autobiographical Writings' is placed first, as the explorations it contains on identity, the subject and autography provide a conceptual framework for the subsequent commentaries. The reflexivity of an autobiographical approach is at the heart of my overall methodology and the form of this section is designed to demonstrate how that can operate. Here are hybrid texts that produce knowledge whilst simultaneously contributing to the formation of the self.

Following immediately after 'Autobiographical Writings' is a short account of a pilot artistic project: 'What is it you wish to speak of?' The question was carefully constructed to stimulate discussion. Its formation and dissemination were designed to identify and collect perspectives on the main areas of debate and concern. 'What is it you wish to speak of?' (as the question might suggest) enquires into the problematic notion of 'voice'. It asks whether the concept of a personal voice is a useful one. It is also concerned with the operation of this terminology within the gendered definition: 'women's voice'. The form of this section demonstrates the importance of language. Its commentary investigates the linguistic construction of the question and in

doing so releases a range of other potential areas of concern. 'What is it you wish to speak of?' speaks of desire and, in a discussion of the editing and interpretation of the digitally filmed answers, I open up debates on public and private and the marked/unmarked body. These are enquiries that prove central to my overall thesis and are revisited in other sections³.

The central section, 'Revisiting *Écriture Féminine*' is a continuation of my autobiographical investigations and the framing task. Here I revisit my early reading of those theories that have been influential in establishing the terms under which I validate my practice. 'Revisiting *Écriture Féminine*' is placed centrally within the structure of my thesis to emphasise the importance of these influences. Its investigative re-reading of seminal texts spreads throughout the thesis, becoming a viral influence. It underpins the commentaries of the other sections, where theories often resurface and are applied and explored in more detail. 'Revisiting *Écriture Féminine*' gives insight into the continuing influence of these ideas. It attempts to construct a dynamic interplay between my practice and existing conceptual frameworks.

The next section, 'The True Aerialist', searches for a way of 'speaking of' those questions that arise out of the process of writing for performance. The enquiry is articulated through a performance script written for a single female performer. She tests (and often rejects) various strategies conventionally made available to women in performance. The True Aerialist explores and exploits the difficulty of speaking (truthfully) and employs strategies of excess,

³ A full account of this project and its outcomes can be found in Appendix Two.

buffoonery and precariousness to comment on questions of representation, plurality, narrative and materialism. The commentary is embedded in the script in a form that attempts to mirror the reflexive dialogue between (myself as) the critical reader and writer of the text.

The section 'Tracings' is dedicated to a play of the same name. Myth is often cited as a characteristic preoccupation of women's writing. In this section a performance script, in which a small cast of historical characters is ascribed mythical roles, and its associated commentary, provide the focus for an exploration of women's use of myth.

Tracings is also concerned with repetition. The second part of my commentary on the play focuses on how repetition operates as a structural and thematic device. It examines how the strategies of revisiting, reflection and retracement contained within repetition are characteristic of women's writing, demonstrating ways in which they provide a particularly productive way of investigating not only myth, but also grief and mourning.

The latter two are as pervasive as autobiography in their influence on my research. As topics, grief and mourning not only stimulate investigation but also provide rationale. The script *Tracings* is a concentrated enquiry into grief and mourning and in this way it provides a context for my 'Closing Words'.

In this last section a personal perspective on grief and mourning provides a final demonstration of my chosen methodology. It is an enquiry that employs the reflexive strategy described throughout this thesis as 'writing

through'. Using this methodology 'Closing Words' takes a personal ending and reflects on it as a way of arriving at an overall conclusion for my thesis.

Writing the Personal

I can only comfort myself with the suspicion that everything I have written has been in some respects an expression of life's longing for itself. (driving home, p75)⁴

Having described the organisation of my thesis, I now address its thematic concerns in more detail and begin by acknowledging the pervasive influence of autobiography. I look back on a title which has changed several times during the course of my studies, and note that the last part of it: 'Writing the Personal', operates as a context for the other two strands of enquiry: 'Speaking of Gender' and 'Language and Identity'.

Autobiography acts as a preoccupation and a defining focus. It defines my approach to theories of language and identity, suggesting how I reach an understanding of these discourses through the characteristics and preoccupations of my own writing. Autobiography also influences my understanding of gender, providing a lived context for the interpretation of its impact on my practice.

There is a sense in which an individual's artistic production – in my case, my writing – evidences a life. It is the difficulty of interpreting that evidence that characterises my enquiry. This difficulty is partly created by my multiple roles. I am author and reader, one who remembers and forgets, who writes in

⁴ Autobiographical writing contained in full in 'Autobiographical Writings' section pp85-108.

the past, in the present and in the future, who operates as gender theorist, teacher and critical commentator. Complexity is also inherent in the various modes of writing I adopt in this thesis, in the range of their operation, in the continual application of one discursive mode of writing to another. I have deliberately combined these factors in an attempt to create a multifaceted enquiry, an investigation potentially equal to the intricate relationship that exists between language, gender and identity.

Language and Identity

In order to provide a context for the writing submitted here and produced over the last five years, I have returned to previously written material. Some of this is my writing; some of it is the writing of others. I have revisited my own artistic production spanning a thirty-year period and I have returned to theory first read in the 1970s and 1980s. This theory was freshly written at that time and I came to it as a naive reader. I was naive in the sense that I had not read a great deal of feminist theory, I was unfamiliar with linguistic theory and I was certainly unaware of the French Feminists' emphasis on the centrality of writing to notions of gender and identity. These ideas about women's writing were new and I was new to them. I read them differently now and this has been an aspect of the process that I have had to acknowledge, negotiate and allow. I have re-read in the context of this prior reading, attempting to layer in the past reader. I did this to acknowledge the continuing

influence of some of those early interpretations and understandings, whilst also attempting to take into account their modification by subsequent texts and ideas and life history. My reflection on them is retrospective, not only in terms of their work, but also my own. The outcome of this contextualised re-reading is contained in the section 'Revisiting *Écriture Féminine*'. Here, I identify those theories that have had particular impact on the construction of my identity as a writer. Their influence has been pervasive but idiosyncratic. Historically I often approached these writers in need, requiring guidance or affirmation and this influenced my understanding. My account reflects the fact that my relationship with these ideas is directly affected by their relationship with my writing practice. For instance, my structuring of 'Revisiting *Écriture Féminine*' runs against the chronology of my original reading of these writers. I came to Julia Kristeva after reading first Hélène Cixous and then Luce Irigaray. Initially I had difficulty with those ideas put forward by Cixous and Irigaray on the relationship between the body and writing, with their use of metaphors of plurality and their suggestion of a feminine language. The reasons for this difficulty were complicated and my explanation of them is retrospective. I have always had difficulty with categorising myself as 'a writer', with owning authorship and accepting the status implied by that authorship. If I was a writer, then what I produced was 'writing'. If I agreed to one, then the other automatically followed and a private activity became potentially public and professional. Any acknowledgement of authorship, simultaneously redefined

an activity whose attraction had initially been its freedom from such potential constraints, from the necessity for external appraisal. In this way, a complex problem of self-validation overlaid my comprehension of the ideas and new concepts suggested by the approach of Cixous and Irigaray. My understanding remained partial and the ideas remained, in some indefinable way, inaccessible and therefore inoperable in relation to my own practice.

It was only much later, when I came to the work of Kristeva, and particularly to her explanation of the link between the formation of language and the formation of psychological subjects, that I was able to orientate myself satisfactorily in relation to my writing. Her use and definition of the terms 'chora', 'semiotic', 'jouissance' and 'poetic language' were revelatory, in that they provided some comprehensible and plausible context for my difficulties. My problem with assuming subject status in relation to my own writing was given validity and I began to understand the position of Cixous and Irigaray as a modification, elaboration and practical application of Kristeva's theories.

The process of revisiting the influence of these writers again, after a period of time, of trying to understand their relationship with my practice has been difficult, but satisfying. It has given me the opportunity to comprehend the detail and progression of ideas initially read in a fragmentary fashion. It has allowed me to organise my knowledge as a precursor to a more thorough understanding of influential texts previously visited unsystematically, or

fleetingly. It has also given me tools for a more penetrating analysis of my own writing.

In the commentaries I suggest ways in which the modification of the ideas of Cixous, Irigaray, Kristeva and their successors in response to critical appraisal, is paralleled by changes and developments in my writing practice.

This process of drawing ideas and theories into a more intimate relationship with particular aspects of my writing was not without problems. There was, for instance, the danger that my critical analysis of these texts could have the potential to constrict or restrain the original text, to ignore its contradictions and excesses. In the commentary on *The True Aerialist*⁵ this becomes apparent when the voice of my commentary vies with the voice of the True Aerialist for authority. It is a contest that, as critic, I am doomed to lose to my original authorial self: my certainties pale under the ferocious stare of the convinced and ideological liar that I have created. She challenges any attempt I make to find some satisfactory or conclusive commentary on her continually shifting and contradictory position. Despite being her creator, I am as confounded as her audience. She exceeds me; she will not allow my neat retrospective overview. As she calls herself a liar, so she renders me mendacious in my role as analytical writer, and I can only flail on this hook of my own making. As I admit in *driving home*, 'I am a martyr to my desire for control', but I also concede that despite this desire 'everything migrates to the

⁵ Female monologue featured with embedded commentary in section 'The True Aerialist' pp166-217. Full unannotated version in Appendix Three ppxcv-cxiv.

floor' (*driving home* p93). A version of this happens when I try to gain authority over a fictional figure bent on challenging an audience that, in this exercise, must include her creator.

In this role, as source text, my writing takes up various modes of operation. *Tracings*⁶, for instance, is a work that has its own narrative and concerns, but it also provides an example of the use of myth and repetition. Adopting a privileged role, I place myself within the world of the piece and its conceits and, using my authorial knowledge of its construction, draw attention to the way my preoccupations are developed, how I allow them to be 'played' out. In this way, as source material, *Tracings* promotes a discussion of the use of certain thematic and linguistic structures within a wider context of women's writing.

In other sections my writing operates as an illustration or epigrammatically, providing an example of a position or an observation. It can also take up a more complex role. In *driving home*, for instance, my writing is both cited and active. Interweaving commentary, autobiographical references and research, I demonstrate that the three are part of a current and continuing relationship and suggest that my observations are necessarily transitory, ephemeral, subject to change. There is a sense in which the observations that I make today are not the ones I might make tomorrow, or in a month's time, or in a different context, outside the parameters of postgraduate study.

⁶ Full-length script for live performance p221-270.

When the work submitted to critical evaluation or historical investigation is itself autobiographical, then these complications become more evident. Re-reading my own writing, I have come to some of it as a stranger. Time has given distance from my previous processes and intentions. There have been moments when I could have been reading and referencing someone else's work rather than my own. Estrangement creates a space easily inhabited by false perspectives and fictional rationale. Who would know the difference? Only I, and I am inevitably complicit. The wish or need to self-historicize is an omnipresent hazard.⁷ So is a search for narrative, for logical patterns of thought, for a neat fit between theory and practice, for observable consequences, for evidence of progress. A parallel autobiography can be constructed through the reading of my previously authored works. It is the fictional writing biography of an author who had clearer aims, for whom cause and effect were more simple, less complicated or elusive. Her work has a familiar feel, but I could almost think that is because I have read it before, rather than because I have written it.

The section on autobiographical writing contains two texts, the first of these, *The/My Female Voice*⁸, begins with the impetus, the set of experiences, which formed the context for my first attempt to write for live performance. It then goes on to visit selected, subsequent writings. Both *The/My Female Voice* and the second text, *driving home* reference my own writing alongside that of

⁷Also identified by Denise Riley (2000 p20) referenced later in 'Autobiographical Writings' p23.

⁸ Autobiographical writing pp30-58 'Autobiographical Writings' section.

authors who have influenced my practice and thinking. These citations can sometimes contain the words of invented characters or personas and in *driving home* I extend my brief further to quote people encountered in my daily life. I give equal weighting to each source and build a multiplicity of voices: polyphony or perhaps cacophony. It is an attempt to represent that haphazard process of accumulation, editing and layering that characterises our day-to-day thought, our struggle for understanding.

Neither account suggests that my experiences are extraordinary. Nor do they describe events as proof of my accomplishments, nor to throw light on my texts. There is no causal, determinist trajectory and no search for truth. If accused of such I would, like the True Aerialist, declare myself a liar in an attempt to deny any pre-existing ontological or essential self. I am not expressing a self that already exists, or is fixed in a way that could be directly described or reflected. This would presuppose an impossible consistency of identity. One cannot assume that attempts at autobiography will result in either authenticity or even what might conventionally be called integrity.

In both *driving home* and *The/My Female Voice*, I make observations about those cultural and social events, ideas and products that run parallel to the development of my practice, whilst simultaneously questioning how my writing functions autobiographically, how it reflects on the relationship that exists between life and writing. I make critical engagement with the nature of that relationship in an attempt to understand how it works, how such a process,

such writing, not only enquires into that lived experience, but also impacts on it, making a text from the life, which then continues to exist as part of that life and thereby infects subsequent writings. I am describing a 'reflexivity' that characterises my overall methodology and produces a body of writing that thinks and acts simultaneously.

Language gives us the means of conceptualising ourselves as an object (the self-concept): In other words, it enables us to develop a strong sense of 'standing outside' ourselves and of our engagement with the world, which is the essence of reflexivity. (Hunt and Sampson, 2006 p18)

A reflexive methodology requires a certain distancing within the self.

This extends to an awareness of the influence of oneself within the research process. The type of research process engaged with here is also often referred to as 'practice-based'. This term implies a method that seeks to release knowledge generated through the interaction between work and its context.

Where reflection could be said to involve taking something into oneself – a topic, an event, a relationship – for the purpose of contemplation or examination, reflexivity involves putting something out in order that something new might come into being.

(Hunt and Sampson, 2006 p5)

As I have already made clear, the concept of 'reflexivity' is central to this research and to my practice. For this reason, I will introduce some initial thoughts on my definition and usage here. I will then continue to expand on these ideas throughout my thesis, developing and layering my definition and fleshing it out with appropriate examples taken from my own writing and from theoretical sources.

There is strong support for a concept of writing that describes the

writing subject as engaging in a process of 'doubling or splitting'. This process is also variously described as being 'both inside and outside', 'switching back and forth' and 'distancing self from other.'

The act of doubling the self within the creative process has its roots in psychoanalytic theory. Freud, for instance, suggests that an artist is capable of 'a certain flexibility in the repressions' (Freud (1933) 2003 p314). He is describing an ability to bypass the inhibiting force of the 'ego-self' in order to access the imaginative potential of the unconscious. The practitioner is then able to transform this unconscious material, which in Freudian terms is usually described as sexual desires, into art, thereby making these wishes both accessible and acceptable to others.

More recent theorists, for instance Derrida, describe writing as intrinsically reflexive. His theory of 'différance' describes the gap that exists between a language already written in the unconscious and our conscious attempts to convey meaning. Derrida suggests that, engaging in this process, we double ourselves (Derrida, 1976).

Mikhail Bakhtin's employment of the term 'dialogic' has also influenced my use of the word 'reflexive'. Bakhtin describes processes of 'double-voicing' inherent in irony and parody, where more than one voice/opinion/proposition is contained within a single voice (Bakhtin, 1981).⁹

My use of 'reflexivity' implies that, in these various ways, writing offers

⁹ See footnote 10 and description of short prose, *America! America!* in 'Autobiographical Writings' pp55-58.

writers the possibility of this doubling. Further, in a research exercise that brings into play theoretical influences, another layer of reflexivity is also in operation. To be the distanced reader of a previously achieved 'I' is a complex psychological procedure. The self is doubly or even trebly in question, once in the past, once in the present, and in between runs the 'I' of the critical writer. She is the baton-carrying, second woman in a team of three running a relay race and is more concerned with the reception of this re-presented 'I'. She has an 'eye' on the finishing line, the cheering supporters, those who examine the photo finish.

My use of 'reflexivity' includes this possibility. It describes a process where the boundaries between theory and practice are porous and provide continual passage back and forth. As I have already indicated, my writing has been a forum where I have actively operated on the ideas, genres and modes suggested by certain writers. I have written in the light of their influence¹⁰ and innovations and my writing has been a way of processing, interpreting and shedding light on their theories. Another way of describing this is to say that my writing has been 'inflected' by these theorists/practitioners.

There is also a proposal running through this thesis that writing can be part of an activity which can most easily be described as 'self-in-process'.¹¹ As early as 1971 Donald Winnicott was describing the creative process as

¹⁰ The influence of Bakhtin is also present here in an acknowledgment of his use of the term 'heteroglossia' and the primacy of context over text. My use of 'reflexivity' uses 'dialogism' as Bakhtin defines it, as 'the characteristic epistemological mode of a world dominated by heteroglossia' (Bakhtin (1981) pp426-9).

¹¹ For a further discussion of this term see 'Autobiographical Writings' pp20-27.

contributing to the development of the self, as opening up the possibility of self transformation (Winnicott, 1971). I adopt the phrase 'writing through'¹² to describe a writing process which contains the possibility of this continual exchange. My definition of this aspect of reflexivity, however, also contains an acknowledgement of broader definitions of the self and of language employed by, for instance, Derrida. He uses the term 'écriture' to describe *all* our cultural systems of signification. For Derrida speaking always contains this 'writing' and so we, as members of a language-based society, use words that are constantly in the process of being written and re-written (Derrida, 1978). I also incorporate Kristeva's definition of 'poetic language'¹³; her suggestion that this form of language inevitably transforms society through, and as a result of, its transformation of the subject (Kristeva, 1984).

Speaking of Gender

My research is determined to 'give voice' to the complex and elusive task presented by such a reflexive process. Simultaneously and as a result, it sets up a context in which I can speak. 'Giving voice' is often used traditionally and metaphorically to denote a process of empowerment. It suggests a 'voice' 'given' by external authority.¹⁴ This research is concerned with those factors that

¹² See further discussion of my definition of 'writing through' in 'Revisiting Écriture Féminine' p131-132 where I refer to it as 'a methodology less concerned with representing knowledge and more concerned with producing it'.

¹³ For discussion and definition of 'poetic language' see p123-124, p135, p153, p158.

¹⁴ See 'What is it you wish to speak of, Appendix Two, sections 'Speak' and 'Talk' pp xliii-liv, for further discussion.

give that 'right to speech,' that allow, that make possible, validate, support and give space. It is also concerned with testing, with the ground rules, the disavowals – all those aspects that have the potential to confound. Primary amongst this range of factors and operating as both validator and tester is gender. Gender has provided me with a forum and a focus. It has always been a source of intense concern. However, as a muse it has been erratic and evasive and has sometimes lacked integrity. Gender has sought levels of visibility and invisibility and has moved from ghosting my efforts to temporarily abandoning me without warning. At times it has taken up residence in my protagonists and been a party to their actions. At other times it has hidden in the interstices of my intention. There have been moments when gender characterised my reader; fulfilling an honourable, less selfish reason to continue to write; becoming an affirming, politically sound urge to greater and wider production and dissemination. Gender has, however, in the long term, demonstrated a level of constancy that insists on being acknowledged and so part of this thesis must be concerned with defining the range and nature of its influence. Within my writing practice, gender is crucially contingent, an inescapable context and concern, facilitating my attempts to 'write through' my practice in a process that opens up the possibility of knowledge. Gender provides the necessary complementary vehicle – it is the carrier.

In this research, for instance, gender provided an immediate and unavoidable set of questions around the concepts and definitions suggested by

the terminology of an early working title: 'The/My Female Voice'. I asked myself whether there was something that could be defined as a female voice and, in considering how to answer this first question, I developed a second one: 'how, if such a female voice existed, might it speak itself?'

I decided that if I was able to hear women speaking, I might better understand whether their voices could be described as having characteristics that could support notions of a gendered language. In the light of this decision, I devised a project: an account of which is included here under the title, 'What is it you wish to speak of?'¹⁵

This project attempted to test some of the theories or assumptions revealed by my re-reading of *écriture féminine* against an artistic project. It was designed to embed research within my writing practice as part of my strategy to operate as a reflexive practitioner.

The term 'speaking of' and the detailed investigation that accompanied the devising of the question 'What is it you wish to speak of?' were particularly influential. Whilst questioning my question and arriving at one that operated without prejudice, facilitating the speaker, I recognised my own wish to 'speak of' and was made aware of the centrality of such a preoccupation to this research. From this time, at every point in my investigation, I asked myself what I was speaking of? An exercise that proved invaluable in defining and determining the direction and parameters of my investigation.

¹⁵ See Appendix Two for outcomes of this project.

This is not to say that my process of making proposals and of securing affirmation has not been problematic. My unreliable memories, my insecure ontological self, my continuing and difficult engagement with language have spawned a complicated enquiry into the nature, qualities and experiment of a sometimes more, sometimes less self-consciously gendered voice. This research attempts to give that voice a range of moments where it can achieve articulation, where I can for a finite period finally come up close enough to hear myself speak.

She was losing her distance; things were getting too close. She tried to tell him, but it made no sense when she said, *I just can't seem to get far enough away.*

***For what?* He asked.**

***To see.* She replied.**

See what?

Myself.

(Distance, Appendix One, pxxiv)

Autobiographical Writings

Self-In-Process

the myth of autobiography is that the story is singularly formative,
that the gesture is coherent and monolithic,
that the subject is articulate and the story articulable, and
that the narrative lies there waiting to be spoken.

(Smith and Watson, 1996 p9)

most importantly, identity is not established by a personal life
script, for subjectivity moves backwards and forwards among several
narratives.

(Cavallaro, 2003 p80)

a non narcissistic reflexivity.

(Ricoeur, 1991 p432)

In my introduction I acknowledge the centrality of autobiography to this project. I have chosen, therefore, to place this section first to act as a conceptual frame for my subsequent investigations. It begins with this discussion of the nature of autobiographical writing, giving particular emphasis to its importance for women writers. This is followed by two examples of my autobiographical writing. These were specifically written for this section and contain autobiographical material relevant to my writing practice. They are also designed to investigate potential forms for autobiographical writing.

driving home and *The/My Female Voice*, are texts that simultaneously reflect and create, which produce knowledge as part of their way of knowing. They are writings engaged in the formation of the self; writings which observe the making of that self, but which cannot be, in the articulation of those observations, divorced from the self. They are writings presenting 'the self in the process of becoming' (Nalbantian, 1994 p37). These texts could also be

described as, 'A re-enactment of a certain drama of identity formation' (Eakin cited Nalbantian, 1994 p38). Julia Watson and Sidonie Smith expand on this notion of drama when they describe autobiographical telling as,

'performative': it enacts the "self" that it claims has given rise to an "I". And that I is neither unified nor stable – it is fragmented, provisional, multiple, in process. (Watson and Smith, 2005 pp8-9)

My understanding of the role of writing in this process is further informed by H. Porter Abbott's definition of the writing/written subject. Abbott uses the word auto-graphy to describe writing which, rather than attempting to define or give shape to the author's life, attempts to make the author present to her/him self (Abbott (1987) in Gendron (2004)). He suggests that such work explores the notion of the self through an investigation of the subject and its relation to the written word. Abbott's self is capable of producing texts, but also subject to being produced by them. Nicole Brossard also pursues a similar definition in *The Aerial Letter*, where she describes her writing in this way:

We concentrate a great deal on the self. We exert ourselves, and in so doing we summon the other within ourselves to a reality which is transformed. (Brossard (1985)1988 p67)

Susan Ostror Weisser demonstrates a particular attitude towards this interdependency of the subject and the written word when she describes the research methodology she adopts as part of a project collecting life stories. Her methodology is not one that presumes 'the real to be present and accessible as an objective, quantifiable or verifiable entity'. Instead Weisser adopts a process that temporarily presumes each life she investigates to exist only 'in language'; a state that she also defines as 'outside of history' (Weisser in Smith and

Watson, 1996 p251). Nicole Brossard also describes a search to speak identity, which is 'simultaneously a quest for and a conquest of meaning'. She describes a moment when words 'begin to turn around on themselves, inciting reflection, inciting thought toward new approaches to reality' (Brossard (1985) 1988 p67-68).

Continuing this search for a new approach to both the development of identity and the role of language in that development, Kristeva's definition of the subject in process acknowledges the role of the 'pre-linguistic' in the process of self-development. Her use of the word 'liminary' in the following quotation suggests language's pre-emptive, pre-constitutional operation in relation to the subject.

We view the subject in language as decentring the transcendental ego, cutting through it and opening it up to a dialectic in which its syntactic and categorical understanding is merely the liminary moment of the process. (Kristeva (1974)1984 p30)

Pursuing and modifying this notion of the pre-linguistic, Celia Hunt and Fiona Sampson refer to Antonio Damasio's work on the relationship between the body, feelings and consciousness. They use his identification of a body's 'narrative of feeling' to justify the notion of a 'core self' on which language operates.

But it is the 'core self', constantly monitoring and making us aware of our feelings, that provides the ground out of which this reflexivity takes place.

Hunt and Sampson go on to suggest that:

A view of the self as in process, then – which embraces both the notion of a felt core self arising out of the body and the linguistic self of extended consciousness – may enable us to make sense of a self that is experienced as stable and continuous but is also constantly undergoing a process of change. (Hunt and Sampson, 2006 p21)

This 'self-in-process' can manifest itself throughout an author's work, even in those texts that make no claim to autobiography. Denise Riley observes that, 'Any writer will inadvertently historicize herself in her work, however non-self referential it claims to be' (Riley, 2000 p28). She describes the investigating self as its own historian, citing early accounts of women's lives written in the service of the women's liberation movement. She also identifies an associated temptation to write 'a dynamic history of the personal as political', and ends by concluding that this is good reason to pay close critical attention to these accounts, suggesting that the evaluation of them 'demands the hardest criticism and a knowledge of every rhetorical trick in the book' (Riley, 2000 p30).

As I suggest in my introduction, I would not claim that the autobiographical writings included here avoid this retrospective elaboration of events, or the occasional false marrying of cause and effect. I would resist a definition which requires autobiography to represent actual rather than imagined events. There is not the neat divide between the two that a clear separation of fact from fiction might suggest. In the words of Nicole Brossard, 'Fiction seeks its own fictional subject and memory alone does not flinch' (Brossard (1985)1988 p67). My position owes more to Eakin who states that,

'autobiographical truth is composed of certain fictions' (Eakin in Nalbantian, 1994 p38).

If we understand autobiography as making reference to the past, or being shaped by memory, it is also an activity that remains in the service of the present. Smith and Watson prefer the term 'life narrations' to the word 'autobiography' and refer to these acts of remembering as 'narrated memory'. Describing them, they observe that,

...in the act of remembering, the autobiographical subject actively creates the meanings of the past. Thus narrated memory is an interpretation of a past that can never be fully recovered.

Smith and Watson call these personal narrators bricoleurs and describe them as able to 'remake their understanding of the "truth" of the past and reframe the present by bringing it into a new alignment of meaning with the past' (Smith and Watson, 2005 p 9-14). Daniel Schachter would claim such remembering is more aptly described as remembered experience rather than the replication of an event. He expands on this statement by saying that our identity does not *have* these experiences but is made up of them (Schachter in Smith and Watson, 2005 p9).

For me autobiography is not confined to introspective, personal confession. I am interested in autobiography's relationship with the development of knowledge, with the possibility of women becoming epistemological subjects. For this reason I am interested in the relationship between personal accounts and public forms and forums.

When they effect a movement of information from the private to the public domain, personal stories become available to a wider group who have their own narrations. When the accounts interact, autobiographical telling can, 'facilitate changes in the mapping of knowledge and ignorance, of what is speakable, disclosed or masked, alienating or communally bonding' (Smith and Watson, 1996 p15). And even if women's texts remain intensely concerned with the private or personal, this should not be seen as less valuable. Such evaluations rely on a view of women as essentially domestic and narcissistic.¹⁶ They fail to see the exploration of the everyday, or the invocation of female narcissism, as valuable acts of transgression or resistance.

For the woman artist is not privileged or mandated to find her self-in-world except by facing (affronting?) and mounting an enormous struggle with the cultural fictions – myths, narratives, iconographies, languages – which hitherto have delimited the representation of women. And which are culturally and psychically saturating.
(DuPlessis, 1990 p5)

I would claim that, in most cases, my engagement with self-description is less a simple effort to understand (through the act of re-presentation) myself, than a more complicated attempt to place myself into a reflexive, dynamic and evolving relationship with wider contexts, concepts or events. Describing the everyday uses of autobiography, Smith and Watson describe post-modern life as complex and requiring the negotiation of 'multiple locations of identity on a daily basis' (Smith and Watson, 1996 p13). DuPlessis also states that:

The struggle with cultural hegemony, and the dilemmas of that struggle, are articulated in a voice that does not seek authority of tone or

¹⁶ See further discussion of 'the domestic', pp130-131, p167 and p333.

stasis of position but rather seeks to express the struggle in which it is immersed. (DuPlessis, 1990 p13)

Autobiographical writing provides an opportunity to talk to oneself. It is 'both an enquiry into and an act of specific ontology: this is who I am and this is how I know. It is I who speaks thus...' (Hall, E6 p 294). The title of my first text *The/My Female Voice* suggests that this intimate conversation is understood through the relationship between self and context. *The/My Female Voice* was written to clarify my relationship with this project. It does this by considering the subject who speaks. Not only does *The/My Female Voice* acknowledge the reflexive relationship between context and practice, but its title also questions the relationship between the singular and the universal, by suggesting that 'the' and 'my' are interchangeable. In a commentary on Karen Mac Cormack's 'polybiographic' text, *Implexures*, John Hall describes a kind of autobiographical writing that 'wants to push around in being, in status, in posture – either the being of the implied utterer or of the objectified world which authenticates this same being as co-present and as witness'. He describes this writing, as wanting 'to be at once singular and universal', and he represents this typographically 'as an oscillation between *being* and *Being*'. Hall makes a distinction between this and writing that 'knowingly operates in nets and modes of knowledge'. He suggests that these knowledges include language and summarizes *Implexures* as being 'at once ontological, epistemological and narratorial (being, knowing and story-telling)' (Hall, E6 p 294-296).

My second text, *driving home*, attempts to search within the anecdotal and autobiographical for methodological indicators. The how and why of my writing practice run across, over and around each other, acting as short and inconclusive pathways within the investigative structure of the whole. In this way life narration or autobiography can be seen as an ambiguous space that can also incorporate those experiences that occur during composition. In *driving home* I describe the act of writing and the conditions under which it takes place. I refer to a search for organization, even as I write in free flow – strategy that makes reference both to Gertrude Stein's ((1926) 1967) concept of the continuous present and to Foucault's description of the author as 'the principle of thrift in the proliferation of meaning' (Foucault (1969) 1989 p988).

The accumulated definitions of self-in-process discussed here, can form the basis for an understanding of the particular reflexivity of autobiographical writing. We begin to understand its value as a means of mediating the interdependency of self and language. In so far as they attempt to exploit this mediating role, the works featured here are their own commentary – a descriptive, contextualising, investigative activity that is simultaneously searching for its own mode of address – is looking for how it is yet to be written.

Throat Clearing

...it's doggerel, to flesh out questions of the self's presence to itself that might, in a more laboured way, be raised in critical prose; and it would be a sticky sanctity which, glamorising 'creative writing' as unassailable, insisted on an unbridgeable demarcation between the poetic and the analytic. (Riley, 2000 p93)

The/My Female Voice runs selectively but chronologically through my writing, giving edited examples of a practice and picking over this material for evidence of preoccupation and direction. In this journey, both the events of my life and their writing outcomes are required to hold hands. Just as, when a child, I had to hold the hand of another classmate on the school march through the city of Leicester to the swimming pool. This journey is anchored in my memory by the sickly, sweet smell of rotting flesh piled by the open doors of a tannery we had to pass en route. Some of the memories, referred to in *The/My Female Voice*, have a similar pervading aroma. It is a tang that insinuates itself into the productive collusion between remembering and recording. I also draw into this heady mix some of my early theoretical investigations. *The/My Female Voice* was contemporaneous with the filming of 'What is it you wish to speak of?' ¹⁷ It was written at an early stage in my re-reading of those French Feminist writers described throughout this research as falling under the heading *écriture féminine*.

In the process of assembling the various sections of my thesis into a coherent whole, I was tempted to go back and re-write *The/My Female Voice*. At

¹⁷ See account of the making of this film in the section 'What is it you wish to speak of?' and DVDs both in Appendix Two ppxxxiii-lxxxix and pxc respectively.

the end of this process, I felt the need to add qualification to those observations made at its beginning. Re-reading *The/My Female Voice*, I also felt that embarrassment, which often accompanies a retrospective reading of personal writing. But after further consideration I decided to retain *The/My Female Voice* in its original form. As it visits a range of writing styles and forms utilised over a long period, *The/My Female Voice* gives some indication of the origin of some of my preoccupations. It documents the enthusiastic questioning that characterised my initial impetus to begin this research and, including it here, early in this thesis, is a way of maintaining the authentic chronological narrative of my research.

The/My Female Voice operates across analysis and description and references both my writing and that of others. The section headings are the titles of selected source works.¹⁸

It is 'material evidence'¹⁹ I give you here, material to the fabric of this woman's life.

¹⁸ Please note that in *The/My Female Voice* and throughout this thesis any of my writing quoted in the body of a commentary or hybrid text will be indicated in **bold type** to distinguish it from other sources.

¹⁹ *Material Evidence* (1989) is the title of an early script for live performance, further reference is made to it in this section on pp43-48.

The/My Female Voice

Coming to Writing

It is impossible to define a feminine practice of writing....for this practice can never be theorized, enclosed, encoded – which doesn't mean that it doesn't exist. But it will always surpass the discourse that regulates the phallogentric system; it does and will take place in areas other than those subordinated to philosophical/theoretical domination. It will be conceived of only by subjects who are breakers of automatisms, by peripheral figures that no authority can ever subjugate.

(Cixous (1975) 1976 p 46)²⁰

Since 'coming to writing' (Cixous (1977) 1991)²¹ I have been learning continuously. I have set myself challenges and I have explored possibilities. This is not to say I have my own voice, as I am sympathetic to what Rachel Blau DuPlessis has to say about such claims:

When I write, I am not writing for myself, or even (*grosso modo*) as myself. I am writing the voice, a voice, one bricolaging, teasing voice of a working. A raw exhilaration. At ruptures. At relativizing the "universal". At creolizing the "metropole". At writing a feminist-feminine-female bolus of scrapping and loving orts into existence. Writing not as personality, writing as praxis. For writing is a practice – a practice in which the author disappears into a process, into a community, into dis-continuities, into a desire for discovery. (DuPlessis, 1990 p173)

But I do have a series of texts, produced over a period of thirty years, which constitute a body of work. This investigation is concerned with the process of their production and with the identification of emerging pre-occupations.

not just "language" but "pursuit".

(Hillman on Clayton Eshleman, 1987 p100)

²⁰*The Laugh of the Medusa* in *Signs*, Summer 1976. Revised version of original publication, *La Rire de la Méduse* in *L'arc* (1975) pp39-54.

²¹ *Coming to Writing* (1991) translated by Deborah Jensen, with modifications by Ann Liddle and Susan Sellers. Originally published as '*La Venue à L'écriture*', in a collection of the same name (1977) Paris: Union Générale d'Éditions, pp10-18.

In *New French Feminisms* Christiane Rochefort opens by saying: 'A man's book is a book. A woman's book is a woman's book' (Rochefort, Marks and de Courtivron, 1981 p183).²² Over the years I have been haunted by this phrase, as it seems, somehow, to express a dilemma that has always existed within my writing practice. The wish not to be categorised, either by others or by myself, has often disallowed attempts to self-consciously embrace those investigations that lie at the heart of many attempts to arrive at some positive definition of women's writing. I have tried to write texts in which I as a woman and an author am in the process of decoding woman as sign; to write texts that are not prescriptive, not about defined intent, except (perhaps?) the intent of writing for other women; to write texts that celebrate sensuality; texts that have instability of subject; that contain irony and excess; that are metonymic – combining not selecting; that are polymorphous and bisexual and deconstruct binary oppositions.

She is attempting to invent a demystified language to describe artistic creativity – that is, a language which by-passes the traditional use of such categories as authorship, originality, expressing intuition and genius. (Mary Iverson on Mary Kelly, in Campbell (Ed.) 1992 p185)

I have wished to write as a woman and yet to not be perceived as writing a woman's book.....or script. It is a distinction that I have maintained, whilst

²² *Are Women Writers still Monsters?* (February, 1975) A speech given at the University of Wisconsin, Madison. Also see more detailed discussion of the nature of women's writing in 'Revisiting *Écriture Féminine*', pp143-159.

knowing that my reaction to Rochefort's statement could be seen as tacitly accepting erroneous and prejudiced definitions of women's writing. It could also be said that any attempt on my part to achieve my first set of aims would effectively cancel out the denial of the second statement. All this I am willing to concede, but the question of why I had such a strong instinctive reaction to Rochefort's statement still remains and was one of the reasons why I decided to enter into this exercise.

Witnessing

Initially, I was inspired by others, by the way they told it. I went in with my questions ²³ and they told me their stories. They started at the beginning and continued until the end.... every time. Any question would prompt this historical, chronological telling. Once upon a time through to the moment – there was always a moment when they finally decided – months, years, decades of abuse, punches, and slaps and kicks, the odd broken rib or dislocated wrist, the innumerable black eyes – and then suddenly it's over:

The breaking point came when I got this: (shows arm which was broken and required hospitalisation) I cut my wrists then, not a lot, only slight – sort of token, and he wasn't a bit bothered, wasn't a bit bothered. My mates at work were more bothered than he was....I walked out and left him, I left the lot, I left him, I left the kids, I left all my clothes, I just left. I just went to work one day and I've never been back since...²⁴

²³ Research Fellow, Keele University (1978-1980) on a DHSS funded project into local services available for women subject to violence from their partners. See also section on interviewing in 'What is it you wish to speak of?' Appendix Two pxxxiii.

²⁴ Transcripts of verbatim accounts included in final report for Department of Health and Social Security, Faragher and Faragher (now Bridger) (1980).

Too little, too much. The day was hot or cold, the blow too hard or too often, the witness too old or young: an accumulation to a point of inevitable change. Suddenly she knew, she thought, she couldn't believe, she had to.

As the hands of the clock pass twelve, the present becomes the past and suddenly she can't understand why she is lying on this worn carpet. Suddenly this room with its hissing gas fire, its steaming nappies and its shadows, is like someone else's room.

Why is she here?²⁵

The narrative drive in these accounts was powerful, common to each woman. It had to be told – this beginning, this middle, this change.

And the words they used – the phrases – sometimes predictable, sometimes banal, but transformed in the telling into haunting fragments that resounded, echoed and chimed. Phrases that, even during the telling, were returned to, almost in wonder, by their speakers: words that conjured up the houses, the gas fires, the poverty, the years of fear and secrecy, loneliness and sheer physical and mental pain; words heard and understood, but then later, when I transcribed the tapes, words that shocked me.

The worst part, when the kids have gone to bed and you are waiting and you are watching the clock and your stomach starts... what sort of mood will he be in. God, have I done the right thing for his supper? It's awful, it really is and I used to listen for his coming in the garden, the way he walked. I used to think if I heard his footsteps I would find out what sort of mood he was in. Or when he knocked at the door if it was very loud I'd know he'd be in a bad mood – if it was a tap, he'd be in a good mood you know. Oh, it's a horrible feeling, and you smoke, and each minute seems like an hour. It's terrible, it's terrible. I don't know how to put it. It's just indescribable unless you've lived through it.²⁶

²⁵ Excerpt from short prose *The Quiet Dark Room* (October 2003), adapted from writings based on interview transcripts.

²⁶ Final report for Department of Health and Social Security, Faragher and Faragher (1980).

So two things already: narrative and ordinary words. Already I have preoccupations and a motivation to write.

One day I was tracked down, besieged, taken. It captured me. I was seized. From where? I knew nothing about it. I've never known anything about it. From some bodily region. I don't know where. "Writing" seized me, gripped me, around the diaphragm, between the stomach and the chest, a blast dilated my lungs and I stopped breathing.
(Cixous (1977) 1991 p9)

I made a promise to myself that I would retell what I had heard and transcribed and that I would do this in an effort to take this material into a more public arena. Why I thought I had the right to do that, or even thought that such a thing might be possible, is difficult to reconstruct. Or perhaps it is just difficult to admit, when hubris or essentialism or patronage present themselves as possible reasons. Instead I will refer again to Hélène Cixous in the hope of finding a more positive motivation, a third motivation which is perhaps more pervasive than narrative and ordinary words, but also more difficult to describe.

What belongs to whom? Whose love-pirate am I?

I listen to and repeat what women tell me at night. One part of the text comes from me. One part is torn from the body of the peoples; one part is anonymous, one part is my brother. Each part is a whole that I desire, a greater life that I envy and admire, that adds its blood to my own blood. In me there is always someone who is greater than I, someone nobler, someone more powerful, who pushes me to grow, whom I love, whom I don't seek to equal, a body, a soul, a text – human, whom I don't want to restrain, whom I want to let circulate freely, to whom I relish having to give the infinite. Hélène Cixous isn't me but those who are sung in my text, because their lives, their pains their force, demand that it resound.
(Cixous (1977) 1991 p46)

It was sense of responsibility perhaps? An empathy, a profound

sympathy that emerged from an inability to separate these women's experiences from my own, despite the fact that superficially we had little in common. I had never experienced violent attack and my personal circumstances were more stable, more prosperous. Nevertheless, I felt the need to act as witness and as a result I wrote a play called *Witnessing*:

CHORUS ONE: He'd get hold of me round the neck and swing me against the sink unit. He used to hurt my back and all down my legs.

CHORUS TWO: I was about five months pregnant and he used me as a dart board.

CHORUS THREE: He used to go for my face. Nobody will ever look at you again. I'll split your face that bad nobody will be able to repair it. The black eyes I've had. My face has always been swollen. Never bothered about concealing anything. He wasn't ashamed of it. Like a madman with his fists.

CHORUS STAND FOR A SECOND. SOUNDTRACK FOR THREE SECONDS, THEN CHORUS MOVE TO NURSE THE AFFECTED PARTS OF THEIR BODIES. ²⁷

In this very early piece for live performance there is also evidence of another pre-occupation. The script begins with a description of the physical actions of the chorus: how their bodies move, what actions they perform. This is set against a soundtrack, which is also described and the actions and soundtrack are treated as part of the text of the piece, as another site of meaning:

THREE WOMEN ENTER RUNNING AND THEN STAND MOTIONLESS FACING THE AUDIENCE. A SHOCKING CACOPHANY OF SOUNDS: WOMEN SCREAMING AND

²⁷ *Witnessing* (1982), script for live performance, Scene One.

SOBBING, CHILDREN AND BABIES CRYING, MEN SHOUTING INCOHERENTLY, FURNITURE CRASHING, PUNCHES, SLAPS, PEOPLE FALLING. DURING THE SOUNDTRACK THE CHORUS MOVE SLOWLY, TWISTING IN AN AGONISED SET OF MOVEMENTS, ARRIVING AT FINAL POSITIONS WHERE THEY CROUCH DEFENSIVELY, THEIRS ARMS COVERING THEIR HEADS. ²⁸

Enter the dancing woman. When at seven I was offered the opportunity of music or dancing lessons, I had no hesitation in choosing the latter. When, shortly after joining the classes, they told me my feet were too big and I was too tall to be a ballerina, I left the classes but remained light on my feet. 'Censor the body and you censor breath and speech at the same time' (Cixous (1977) 1991 p46).

I waited and in my twenties returned to my classes, this time in contemporary dance. This training gave me some understanding of the possibilities inherent in the moving body and a preoccupation with these possibilities is evident in my next piece for live performance.

I Could Have Danced All Night

You don't seek to master. To demonstrate, explain, grasp and then to lock away in a strongbox. To pocket a part of the riches of the world. But rather to transmit: to make things loved by making them known. You in your turn, want to affect, you want to wake the dead, you want to remind people that they once wept for love, and trembled with desires, and that they were then very close to the life that they claim they've been seeking while constantly moving further away ever since.'
(Cixous (1977) 1991 p46)

²⁸ *ibid*, opening stage directions.

I Could Have Danced All Night began its development with a chance encounter. In a council house in the back streets of Tunstall in Stoke on Trent I met Ann. She had and has rheumatoid arthritis, intelligence, integrity and what she described as 'a writing block'. We became close friends and we talked a great deal about her experience of disability: conversation that I developed into a script for live performance.

As the play opens the central figure flaunts both her disability and her rejection of its implications as she dances and sings. The opening stage directions read:

WOMAN IN A WHEELCHAIR CIRCLES THE STAGE IN FIGURES OF EIGHT HUMMING, 'I COULD HAVE DANCED ALL NIGHT. ²⁹

This script also introduced another element of process, during its writing, I kept returning to an instigating image quoted early in the text.

WOMAN 1 PUSHES WHEELCHAIR AROUND THE STAGE LEAVING IT SO THAT CLARE'S BACK IS TO THE AUDIENCE.

CLARE: My name is Clare.

CLARE TURNS HER WHEELCHAIR, WITH SOME DIFFICULTY, TO FACE THE AUDIENCE

CLARE: When children are in pushchairs their mother's chat over their heads, ignoring them.....often the children scream. (SCREAMS)

Recounting her experiences of disability, Ann gave me this image. It became central to my process because it provided a metaphor³⁰ for her

²⁹ *I Could Have Danced All Night*, script for live performance, opening stage directions. Rehearsed Reading (1987) Royal Court Young People's Theatre, Arts Theatre, London (1988). Full Performance, Half Moon, Cockpit, Royal Court Theatre Upstairs + tour of London Schools. Finalist Sherbourne Six Counties Literary Festival.

experience. This metaphor contained the anger of the piece: those attempts by the central character to subvert physical impositions and expectations. These attempts, sometimes futile and sometimes successful, form the substance of *I Could Have Danced All Night*. When it was performed, the play drew criticism. How could I, as an able bodied person, dare to take up the first person narrative of a set of issues which were not part of my own personal experience? I was also criticised for the unrelenting bitterness of the central voice.

WOMAN 1: I'll give you a push.

CLARE: Leave my bloody wheelchair alone!

WOMAN 1: Ah, she's bitter.

WOMAN 2: Some do get bitter.

WOMAN 1: That doesn't help anyone.

CLARE: Especially you.

This reception of the play made me aware of the separation between my work and myself, between intention and reception. I became more aware of the influence of context and the need to consider my relationship with that context. Language was not transparent and neither was I. I could not, for instance, presume on any simplistic notions of my ability, as a woman, to represent other women's experience.

Since, for the textual reader, literature is not a representation of experience but something that is experienced, from a feminist viewpoint the question is not whether a literary work has been written by a woman and reflects her experience of life, or how it compares to other works by women, but rather how it lends itself to be read from a feminist position.

³⁰ See discussion of metaphor in 'Revisiting *Écriture Féminine*' pp148-151.

Sleeping Dogs

....say grief (I can barely mourn and yet I am filled with mourning
for the lost for the costs, for the dead of incomplete revolutions)
(DuPlessis, 1990 p173)

She, so beloved that from a single lyre
more mourning rose than from all women-mourners,—
that a whole world of mourning rose, wherein
all things were once more present: wood and vale
and road and hamlet, field and stream and beast,—
and that around this world of mourning turned,
even as around the other earth, a sun
and a whole silent heaven full of stars,
a heaven of mourning with distorted stars:-
she ,so beloved. (Orpheus. Eurydic. Hermes (Rilke, 1945 p31))

In 'The School of the Dead', Hélène Cixous describes writing as 'this complex activity, "this learning to die"'.³¹ She describes herself as 'entering into writing' (Cixous, 1993 p11-13) when her father died. He was a young man at the time of his death and she was a young child. I also started writing when my father died, but I was a thirty-two-year-old woman by then and my father died an old man at seventy-six. In my fifties I began to write about him:

**The moon comes in at my bedroom window. It falls across my bed
and on to the chest in the corner.**
*to keep things under wraps
to let sleeping dogs lie*
**My mother's sustained unwillingness to be introspective. She brushes
aside emotional discomfort.**
things like that don't bear thinking about
'How many years now since dad...?
'Eight. Yes, It'll be eight years this autumn since Charles died. ³²

³¹ See further reference 'Last Words' pp309-334.

³² Opening section of *Sleeping Dogs*(1992), text included in its entirety on p60-66.

Cixous believes that 'to begin (writing, living) we must have death [...]
We need a dead wo(man) to begin'.³³ She describes writing as an effort not to
'obliterate the picture' and goes on to call it 'an attempt to unerase, unearth, to
find the primitive picture again, ours, the one that frightens us' (Cixous, 1993
pp7-9).

We don't know, either universally or individually, exactly what our
relationship to the dead is. Individually, it constitutes part of our work,
our work of love, not of hate or destruction; we must think through each
relationship. We can think this with the help of writing.'
(Cixous, 1993 p12)

I was not just 'thinking through' (or even 'writing through') my
relationship with my father; I was also establishing some relationship with
previously unknown figures, hidden from me until after his death. These
figures re-interpret not only his death, but also his life. They provide other
viewpoints, multiple versions of my father, my mother and myself. They open
up the possibility of parallel lives and different histories.

**But twenty lost years? My father walks briskly on. My father
has 'the knowledge' but what do we know? About Gladys? About my
mother? And in between? Another wife that's what. Lost in London,
wandering somewhere on the underground. A shadowy figure
feeding the pigeons in Trafalgar Square. Not even a photograph, an
arm around the shoulders; not even a face to put a name to. ³⁴**

To unearth and unerase these pictures and people, is to open up the
possibility of another identity, another set of realities.

³³ See 'Tracings', pp221-308 and 'Last Words', pp309-334 for further discussion of grief and mourning.

³⁴ *Sleeping Dogs* ibid

Friends

In *Friends*, a prose version of *I Could Have Danced All Night*, the central character Clare explores some further aspects of death and grief. I quote from the opening paragraph:

Friends? Well of course I have friends. There is suicide for instance. Suicide is my companion and my consolation. It's at the back of my mind like a tin of corned beef kept at the back of the larder just in case. Suicide helps me to bear the present by giving me a future, something I can look forward to and trust. This may seem nonsense, but then the nature of suicide is tautological, it is always an empty threat. Still....to have so far not ended my life is adequate achievement for my everyday purposes, it gives me a sense of the present passing and allows me to plan ahead. ³⁵

Margaret Higonnet suggests that,

Suicide, like woman and truth, is both fetish and taboo. A symbolic gesture, it is doubly so for women who inscribe on their own bodies cultural reflections and projections, affirmation and negation [...] To take one's life is to force others to read one's death. [...] To embrace death is at the same time to read one's own life. The act is a self-barred signature; its destructive narcissism seems to some particularly feminine.
(Higonnet in Suleiman (Eds.)1986 p68)

Later in *Friends*, the central character describes her relationship with suicide. It is a relationship that she pursues both as a reader and a writer and it critiques those definitions of autobiography that suggest it is an expressive outlet for strong feelings, that it is a therapeutic activity.

Hop, hop, hop. John Paul Sartre said that his best friend was his writing. He said that he never felt lonely or depressed as long as he could write. So I thought, 'What's good enough for JPS is good enough for me.' You see when I was an adolescent I found all that existential stuff so exhilarating. It made me feel less lonely; more at home in the world. I was so glad there were others out there who felt despair, who suffered from crushing waves of guilt and futility.

³⁵ Extract from short prose, *Friends* (1988).

Suddenly I had friends and so I thought perhaps the writing could work for me too. I joined a writing group and I tried to write about my pain, but to my surprise I couldn't. The fact was I wasn't adolescent any more and I just wanted to escape from it. Recording such stultifying misery would only make it more real, down on paper, the evidence is before you members of the jury, in black and white – inescapable.³⁶

Clare's final words are addressed to an 'other voice'. Talking to yourself

is referred to by Alice Jardine in *Death Sentences*. She says:

Since Lacan at the very least, it has been made quite clear, particularly in France, that One never writes without the Other, One never writes Alone; One is always at least two, usually more: One is always coupled with Others...³⁷ (Jardine in Suleiman (Eds.) 1986 p85)

In the case of Clare, this voice could be the self she speaks to when writing, or it could be a potential reader of the autobiographical text. The presence of these voices would suggest that Clare has an ambivalent attitude towards her other self and her audience. She describes the voice as not normal, prurient, an indulgence. At the same time it is clear that this vilified 'other' is also owned and recognised by Clare, is simultaneously needed and despised.

Look, I think you'd better go now. I've decided I don't like you after all. You're not normal. No normal person would want to listen to all this misery. You must be some kind of prurient freak. But I suppose if you are a freak then I am too. You are my indulgence after all. Talking to yourself is such an indulgence. Yes, you'd better go. I've enjoyed your company this morning, but my other companions: my precious pain and my sweet suicide are waiting for me. And I can't let my friends down now can I?³⁸

³⁶ *Friends*, ibid

³⁷ See p126-129 'Revisiting *Écriture Féminine*' and p173 embedded commentary on *The True Aerialist*.

³⁸ *Friends*, ibid

Material Evidence

These preoccupations with other voices and with death and grief are also observable in another early piece of writing *Material Evidence*³⁹ which considers the relationship between women and sewing.

The art/craft hierarchy suggests that art made with thread and art made with paint are intrinsically unequal: that the former is artistically less significant. But the real differences between the two are in terms of where they are made and who makes them. Embroidery, by the time of the art/craft divide, was made in the domestic sphere usually by women for 'love'. Painting was produced predominantly, though not only, by men, in the public sphere for money. (Rosika Parker, 1984 p5)

In 1987 a Women's Arts Organisation working with a community of Asian women in Sheldon, Stoke on Trent approached me. The Asian women had formed a sewing group and the Arts Organisation had plans to exhibit their work and I was commissioned to write a play to be performed at this event. These are the opening words of that play *Material Evidence*.

NARRATOR: **I am the collator, the interleaver, the networker, I am the one with the stitches to sew these pieces together. To take the fragments and make them into a whole. It is material evidence I have: material to the judgement on these women's lives.**

In this script for live performance, I pursue a version of the dramatised documentary form. The piece included adapted first person accounts⁴⁰:

³⁹ *Material Evidence*, script for live performance, rehearsed reading (1989) by South West Women's Arts Network (SWANN) at the Cabaret Theatre, Phoenix Arts Centre, Exeter and the Salem Chapel, headquarters of SWANN.

⁴⁰ These came from a second-hand book, Naders, P. *Sunshine and Shadow*, that I no longer have. It is out of print and I have traced the publisher (New York: Universe Books) but cannot access the date of publication.

POLLY: **SPOTLIT CENTRE STAGE** My mam and the old maid were the same age and were brought up in the same village, but they were never friends for the old maid lived in the big house and was not allowed to play with the village children. As a girl my mam said she was beautiful.... intensely beautiful.

NARRATOR: Already she is blighted.

POLLY: But when she was nineteen her mother died and then her father followed the next winter.

NARRATOR: And now she is alone.

POLLY: Quite alone, for she closed the house and dismissed all the servants. After that, she left the house only once a month to go and see her bank manager. It was said she liked money more than people and only spoke to wrangle over the price of groceries delivered to her door.

NARRATOR: She has a cruel tongue and hates men in particular.

POLLY: This being the case she was left well alone. The village had almost forgotten her when one-day children trespassing in her garden found her stretched out, dead under a tree.

NARRATOR: Her will states that everything shall be sold.

POLLY: So they went through the house to prepare for the sale and ... Oh no, I can't bear it!

SARAH: **CARRYING BABY JOINS POLLY IN THE SPOTLIGHT**
There in the attic they found them – trunks packed full. A trousseau of lace, silk and linen never worn.

POLLY CRIES FREELY.

SARAH: And a great chest on chest with drawer after drawer overflowing with babies' things: tiny

layettes. Not one, but enough for a whole family of babies. Some of them were very old, but others....others were quite new, recently made. And everything – the trousseau and the layettes; all made by hand. The old maid sewed them all – every stitch.

This section of the play demonstrates my concern with death and mourning as the social consequences of certain historical attitudes towards women and work. It also has close parallels with one of my own early experiences. When I was about ten I visited my great aunt. She led me upstairs, explaining that she had something she wanted me to see. My aunt entered a spare bedroom and opened a large wooden chest. Inside there was a complete hand-made trousseau. She had sewn and embroidered and made lace for the contents before the First World War. Her fiancée was killed in this war and the chest and its embroidered linen had remained unused ever since. By the time of this 'showing' my great aunt Alice was in her mid-seventies.

In *Material Evidence* there is again 'evidence' that I am voicing those stories that in some way resonate with my own. When I place this work within the context of my own situation at the time, this connection is more clearly revealed. At the time of writing *Material Evidence* I had one child at primary school and two younger children at home. Up until the birth of the third child I had managed to maintain my part-time lecturing post. With his arrival I 'gave up' this work. I made efforts to categorise this as a positive decision at the time. In retrospect a different picture emerges. My head of department had retained my job until I returned to work after the birth of my second child. With the

advent of the third pregnancy she offered me a full-time job. 'Get a nanny and take it,' was her advice. When I asked instead for another staged return to my part-time job, this was refused. Under the physical strain of a third pregnancy, my reaction was a mixture of relief and anger. However, in the midst of this confusion, I held on to the prospect of 'having more time to write'. Despite these ambitions and my own personal experience, I still find it difficult to admit to these observations by Simone de Beauvoir.

Woman's situation inclines her to seek salvation in literature and art [...] Taking an attitude of negation and denial, she is not absorbed in the real: she protests against it, with words [...] To prevent an inner life that has no useful purpose from sinking into nothingness, to assert herself against given conditions which she bears rebelliously to create a world other than that in which she fails to attain her being, she must resort to self-expression [...] With a little ambition, she will be found writing her memoirs, making her biography into a novel, breathing forth her feelings in poems. The vast leisure she enjoys is most favourable to such activity. (de Beauvoir (1949)1972, p713)

My days were certainly not leisured. It required some discipline to find any 'corner' in which to pursue my writing. Nevertheless, I find de Beauvoir's candid observations chilling because, despite my struggle to fit this work into an emotionally and domestically overcrowded timetable, I still feel vulnerable to an assessment of my writing which de Beauvoir goes on to articulate with terrifying clarity later in *The Second Sex*:

...when she decides to paint or write, merely to fill her empty (sic) days, painting and essays will be treated as fancy work; she will devote no more time or care to them, and they will have about the same value. (de Beauvoir (1949) 1972 p713)

In *Material Evidence* the play's commentary on the particular social pressures on women are illustrated through their involvement with sewing. For one of the characters, a young woman with a child, these pressures are realised with the death of her child.

POLLY:	The baby is very quiet today.
SARAH:	She must sleep if I am to work and we are not both to starve.
WOMAN:	She sleeps well.
SARAH:	And it is well that she does for I have completed little today. My eyes are so tired they smart and run. I cannot see the stitches I am making.
POLLY:	The baby sleeps so soundly.
SARAH:	She must not wake and cry. The mistress will not pay me for work half done.
NARRATOR:	The baby does not cry.
SARAH:	No she is fast asleep so I can work fast to feed us.
POLLY:	Why doesn't the baby wake?
WOMAN AND NARRATOR:	Laudanum.
POLLY:	Why doesn't the baby cry?
WOMAN AND NARRATOR:	Laudanum
POLLY:	You have given her too much.
SARAH:	I know.
POLLY:	(Goes over to look) The baby is dead.

SARAH: **I know. Pass the whisky; a splash will sharpen
my eyes so I can finish this seam.**

As they pursue this 'fancy work' outside the home, as it is converted to the 'paid labour' of their male counterparts, the women sew grief into their quilts and collars and sing anthems of liberation and oppression.

Seven Days and Seven Nights of Mourning

In 2001 Sarah Frances approached me with the proposal that we should work together on *The Epic of Gilgamesh*.⁴¹ I was particularly interested as Sarah had been assigned a moment when the hero engages in seven days and nights of mourning. I was also very keen to collaborate with a practitioner who is engaged in research that challenges the boundaries both of the female voice and of voice improvisation.

I wrote the following text for Sarah. I based it on another 'engendered image' this time donated by the myth. It describes this particular act of mourning as taking place on the banks of a river. In the text, I tried to evoke the landscape of the myth and to suggest that it parallels the landscape of grief.

**The wind skims the trees
Streaking and streaming along the flat shoreline
Whipping up the tide
The wind eats my breath
Scours my throat
And sucks out the tongue of my mourning.**

⁴¹ *The Epic of Gilgamesh* (May 2001). A promenade performance featuring poetry, drama, installation and sound produced by Alice and Peter Oswald.

Sarah and I worked on an improvisation that had the potential to be durational, taking the form of a looped repeat. We wanted this durational form to suggest that the mourning took place not only over seven days and seven nights, but was omnipresent, a never ending state of grief. The loop began with a call that was a version of a summons to prayer. We wanted this initial call to be heard by the audience as they approached the site of the performance, giving them the impression that this event had been taking place for some time. After this prolonged calling, Sarah began to improvise vocally on the text whilst wrapping her head in a length of white cloth. The colour white was chosen as it had connotations with mourning in non-western cultures. Sarah ended with a construction that was similar to those worn by some African women. The whipping up and round of the torn strips of cloth also had gestural similarities with the rending of clothes often referred to in biblical descriptions of grief. When this head wrapping had been achieved, the whole text was through sung before Sarah unwrapped her head again and, adopting her initial pose, repeated the call to prayer. The repetition⁴² in the performance was emphasized by the slow wrapping and swift unwrapping of the head – a physical task which had its own dynamic, its own narrative.

For the performance we also commissioned a soundtrack. This was constructed from samples of Sarah's voice, giving the potential for whispered,

⁴² See more on repetition in 'Beginning Again', 'Tracings', pp299-308.

fleeting, elusive echoes of the sounds she vocalised live. This soundscape conjured an open, wind-swept landscape: the landscape of grief.

Now if you are a woman you are always nearer to and farther from loss than a man is. More and less capable of loss. More attracted, more repulsed. More seduced, more forbidden. The same shadowy impulse, divided in direction, and always its own reverse, pushes you, restraining you, to lose. (Cixous (1977) 1991 p39)

This above quotation from Cixous places my own pre-occupation with grief into the context of a wider and more pervasive sense of loss, which Cixous suggests is experienced by all women. When she describes it as shadowy, Cixous emphasises the haunting qualities of this relationship with loss, the subconscious and insidious nature of its influence and this leads me to on to other autobiographical observations.

I associate fear, resignation, an acceptance of death and lack of possibility, with a sense of boredom. If I am honest enough to be as ruthless as de Beauvoir and if I can face the potential criticism which might accompany any hint that this activity of writing is somehow essential to my well being, my ability to function in the world, I can admit that one of the attractions of writing is that it leaves no space for this fear. One of the most resonant of Cixous' statements charges writing with being

a way of leaving no space for death, of pushing back forgetfulness, of never letting oneself be surprised by the abyss. Of never becoming resigned, consoled; never turning over in bed to face the wall and drift asleep again as if nothing had happened; as if nothing could happen. (Cixous (1977) 1991, p3)

When I fell ill as a child, my mother often left me alone at home. She had little choice; she worked part-time and could not afford to take time off. These periods felt interminable to a lonely child. One day to keep me amused she set out a painting table: paper, paints, brushes and a pot of water. I can still recall (or do I reconstruct?) the warmth of the sun on the top of my head and the delicious dipping of the brush into the water in preparation for the first mark. I see the pigment swirl in the clean water. Smell the hot paper, recollect the anticipation of the first mark and see it bleed into the soft cream newsprint.

My mother left me to my painting and then in an instant, it seemed, she was back. I had painted all afternoon, had the colourful, figured sheets to prove it. I had been completely absorbed by the occupation, there had been no space for loneliness and boredom and this thrilled me.

Who can define what "having" means; where living happens; where pleasure is assured? It's all there: where separation doesn't separate; where absence is animated, taken back from silence and stillness. In the assault of love on nothingness.....The other is safe if I write. Writing is good: it's what never ends. The simplest, most secure other circulates inside me. Like blood: there's no lack of it....

(Cixous (1977) 1991 p4)

I can also remember a second significant incident much later in my life. When I was a single parent, my son would often spend days away with his father. I found them hard to fill. I was too used to bending to the constant demands of a young child and had lost the capacity to just amuse myself. I did not have the space or the time to set up painting equipment (I had always

painted on a large scale) so I decided to review two exhibitions that I had just visited.

My day was fully taken up with this 'work' and I realised that this was a process that was available to me in those snatched free days. All I needed was a pencil and some paper. I could engage in this activity any time, anywhere – and I did – from then on.

The second seductive quality of writing was that it felt like an act of rebellion.

Speaking (crying out, yelling, tearing the air, rage drove me to this endlessly) doesn't leave traces: you can speak – it evaporates, ears are made for not hearing, voices get lost. But writing! Establishing a contact with time. Noting! Making yourself noticed!!!

"Now that is forbidden." (Cixous (1977) 1991, p15)

'Get out there, get published, get that play on, be seen, stand up, come forward, speak.' Even for a child as rebellious as me this was and is difficult. It is well documented that women have a history of resorting to the private notebook, which may or may not find its way into a more public arena.⁴³

Why [...] was there no continuous writing done by women before the eighteenth century? [...] A little thought will show us that we are asking questions to which we shall get, as answer, only further fiction. The answer lies at present locked in old diaries, stuffed away in old drawers, half obliterated in the memories of the aged. It is to be found in the lives of the obscure – in those most unlit corridors of history where the figures of generations are so dimly, so fitfully perceived.

(Woolf, 1979 p43)

⁴³ See further discussion of various aspects of the private/public debate in 'What is it you wish to speak of?' Appendix Two.

Boudicca Queen of the Barbarians

A Girl is Being Killed

In the beginning, I desired.

"What is it she wants?"

"To live. Just to live. And to hear myself say the name."

"Horrors! Cut out her tongue!"

"She can't keep herself from flying!"

"In that case, we have special cages."

(Cixous (1977) 1991, p8)

My fear of being punished for crossing the invisible line between private and public, for breaking through the glass ceiling, is explored in my short story,

Boudicca Queen of the Barbarians.

**So I am to be Boudicca, Boudicca queen of the Barbarians.
My husband told me it was an honour, but his mistress looked away
and led my daughter from the room. Still Boudicca it is. ⁴⁴**

Boudicca defies her husband and the senate and overcomes death in the form of the Bestiarii – an archetype of brutalised male strength.

What do you call a person...who fights like a hero, would give up
her life like a mother.... (Cixous (1977) 1991 p96)

In her defiance Boudicca is aided and abetted by another woman, who should be her rival and enemy but whose common female identity overrides this possibility.

**The peacock comes further out of the shadows, its body is
clearly female, but the mask covers the whole head and the voice is
muffled. 'Your mask fits well.' I say.**

**'Too well, we women mask our feelings too well.' The
intonation is familiar, I try again, 'The peacock is an elegant bird.'**

**'With a small head. This mask is hollow. A small hollow head
which fits me too snugly.'**

⁴⁴ Opening paragraph *Boudicca Queen of the Barbarians*, shortlisted: Asham Prize (2003) *Real Writers Award* (2004) broadcast Radio 4 (2005) full version see Appendix One ppiii-xv.

'If it pinches why not take it off?'

In this interaction with its final challenge, the good intention of the 'peacock' is masked along with the woman's identity. Her criticism of the mask, of its over close fit and Boudicca's challenge to remove it initiate a scenario in which a classic male action hero is replaced by a central female protagonist and the stereotypical jealousy between wife and mistress is undermined.

Over my shoulder I see the peacock pull off her mask and whirl it above her head. It spins so fast the feathers blur into a streak of blue fire. Sweat is running into my eyes, it's difficult to see, to recognize...and then the mask flies into the air and there is the woman with her arm aloft. My eyes clear and I see it is, of course, my husband's mistress cheering and waving, shouting and laughing. 'On!' she cries, 'On, on!' ⁴⁵

In *Boudicca Queen of the Barbarians* the heroine's letters to the senate and the poetry that she reads in the forum are potent enough to require her death. It is both a justification for, and a warning of, the possible and disproportionate consequences of such action. In this account the subsequent levels of bravery required of the transgressor are rewarded by her eventual success. The story 'invents' a challenge to Virginia Woolf's statement:

The world did not say to her as it said to them (Flaubert, Keats), write if you choose; it makes no difference to me. The world said with a guffaw, write? What's the good of your writing? (Woolf (1929) 1979 p54)

⁴⁵ Final paragraph *Boudicca Queen of the Barbarians* ibid.

...the real strength of the women's liberation movement is not that of having laid claim to specificity of their sexuality and the rights pertaining to it, but that they have actually departed from the discourse conducted within the apparatuses of sexuality....a veritable movement of desexualisation, a displacement effected in relation to the sexual centering of the problem, formulating the demand for forms of culture, discourse, language, and so on, which are no longer part of that rigid assignation and pinning-down to their sex which they had initially in some sense been politically obliged to accept in order to make themselves heard.

(Foucault cited by Moi in Kauffman, 1989 p16)

In the mid eighties Cora Kaplan identified a split in feminist criticism between liberal humanists, who consider 'psychosexual experience' as more meaningful for women than social oppression, and socialist feminists, who 'foreground social and economic elements in text and view fantasy and desire as anarchic and regressive' (Kaplan in Greene and Kahn 1985 p146).

I also identified this split in the ideology of the women's group that I attended in the mid 1980's. My subsequent involvement with women's refuges and my work with Ronald Frankenberg in the Sociology department at Keele University on an investigation of services available for women subject to violence from their partners, confirmed an affiliation to the socialist feminist side of the divide.⁴⁷ The writing produced at this time reflects this allegiance. But subsequent writings consistently question that position, testing it against the development and modification of feminist theories.

⁴⁶ *America! America!* short prose, winner *Prose Writer of the Year 2002 (Writers Incorporated)*, published *Leviathan Quarterly* No.5 September (2002), see Appendix One pp xvi-xxii.

⁴⁷ See footnote 111 and *Spare Rib* letter p114-115.

Foregrounding issues in my early work could operate at the expense of conventional development of character. I was criticised for this, and for producing work, which, though falling within the 'issue based' category, remained unresolved and open-ended, confusing in its message. I was accused of using a style that straddled fiction and fact; that lay between story telling and documentary, that in length, form and use of language, could only be described as 'prose poetry' or 'poetic'.

I decided to employ various strategies which I believed could resolve this without conceding my right to write between the lines of documentation and fiction, prose and poetry. I tried to adhere to a position that was eclectic and polyvalent. I used first person singular and mixed colloquialisms with traditional forms of poetic address. I wrote multi-authored texts, collided tenses, and mixed memory with fantasy and fact with fiction.

Irigaray's conception of feminine subjectivity leads to a set of stylistic and formal tendencies widely recognised in *l'écriture féminine*: double or multiple voices, broken syntax, repetitive or cumulative rather than linear structure, open endings. (Wolff, 1990 p133)

In 2002 after the events of September 11th I wrote a piece which I had no intention of making public. I wrote it as a way of releasing some of my emotional, intellectual and political confusion.

Words always too remote, too abstract to capture the subterranean swarm of seconds, insinuating themselves into unimaginable places. Writing them down tests an argument, as does love. What is love, for a woman, the same thing as writing.

(Kristeva, *Stabat Mater*, in Suleiman (Ed) 1986 p100)

In the first person narrative of *America! America!* the events of September 11th are 'recalled' by a dying female voice experiencing 'jouissance' : a little death within a greater death; a ravishment of grief and regret for her own death and that of others. Mary Eagleton gives a concise account of the importance of 'jouissance' to *écriture féminine*.

For Kristeva and Cixous *jouissance* is what happens when writing becomes pulsional pleasure linked to the presence of the chora (Kristeva) or the mother's body (Cixous) And for Barthes, *jouissance* is what the reader experiences when producing or possibly re-producing precisely the kind of text which suspends the bland certainties of the ego dominated by the symbolic order.' (Eagleton, 1989 p199) ⁴⁸

America! America! is an attempt to explore both these possibilities, through my authorship of the piece and through the representation of the thoughts and experience of the central figure:

Yes, I'm losing blood, but it doesn't matter, I'm sure I have it to spare. My body feels so solid now. It fills all this space with hard muscle and bone. It's seething with life, pulsing and flickering with tiny movements, vibrant and bloody as the carnation. Every sound down here is like an oratorio, every peppering of dust the most sensuous caress. This earth tastes sweet on my lips and in the darkness I can see every colour there has ever been. I am home and warm here. The lovely curve of my spine rests on these jags of concrete and steel as if stretched out on the softest bed.
(Appendix One, pxviii)

And later:

Sleep, I must sleep. It's warm as blood down here and the dust is too soft; my cheek can no longer resist its pillowry charm. I look at my porcelain white hand. One finger is lifted and seems so lonely I wish I could take it in my mouth and lick it clean and kiss it. My thigh too I would love to stroke back into feeling. But I'm so warm and sleepy my longings are distant, like that slow thudding which could

⁴⁸ See Appendix Two plxvi for Joan Retallack's notes on 'jouissance' and Appendix footnote 21.

**be my own heartbeat, or...perhaps... someone somebody pounding
above?** (Appendix One, pxxi)

Despite its now 'award winning' status⁴⁹ *America! America!* has been a controversial piece, not only for others, but for myself. The nature and quality of debate surrounding the ethics of using such tragedy as a basis for making art, I have found unhelpful. My attempts to gain publication in the United States have been unsuccessful. Strong positive and negative response to the text interfered with my attempt to use the writing process as a way of opening up my emotional, intellectual and political confusion.

What does remain, as a positive outcome from the process, is a soundtrack based on the text. It features a single voice, calling out into the darkness. This voice is edited and layered to form a multiple voice, a chorus of voices that reflects back on itself as, moment upon moment, it recalls the terrors of the near past and sets them against the ravishing present.⁵⁰

Writing in *Feminist Review* on the impact of feminism on the theatre, Michelene Wandor claimed that the control of a set of multiple voices and the public control of an imaginative world made the woman playwright a far greater threat than the female novelist. (Wandor in Eagleton (Ed) 1989 p105). When in the soundtrack of *America! America!* these multiple voices coalesce into a single female voice, they imbue it with authority and power and heterogeneity. It is a voice, which I would not wish to claim as my voice, but it is a voice that begins to possess the qualities I seek.

⁴⁹ See footnote 46.

⁵⁰ CD enclosed in Appendix One pxxiii.

Sleeping Dogs and A Looped Footage

There follow two prose pieces, each with a different autobiographical emphasis. The first, *Sleeping Dogs*, has already been quoted and referred to in 'The/My Female Voice'. It was written ten years before this research was begun in 1992 and is autobiographical in that it refers to aspects of my family history. The second, *A Looped Footage*, is a sequel to *America! America!*, and was also mentioned in 'The/My Female Voice'. *A Looped Footage* refers to the aftermath of the events of September 11th in New York. It was written during the period of my research and juxtaposes the events of the Iraq war with the everyday life of a woman. It too is autobiographical in that the news extracts were taken from those I heard or read at the time and the events of my life were also recorded on a day-by-day basis alongside these international events. However, it can be read as a piece of fiction as is made clear in this review by Rosie Jackson,

....in issue 40 of *Tears in the Fence*, you have a beautiful example of the journal form skilfully used, with Barbara Bridger's 'Looped Footage'. Her weaving together of a woman's domestic experience with the war waging in Baghdad passed a heartfelt thread through the political in a way that a less personal aesthetic could not have done.⁵¹

⁵¹ 'Between the Lines' in *Tears in the Fence*, issue 41, Summer 05.

Sleeping Dogs

The moon comes in at my bedroom window. It falls across my bed
and on to the chest in the corner.

*to keep things under wraps
to let sleeping dogs lie*

My mother's sustained unwillingness to be introspective. She brushes
aside emotional discomfort.

things like that don't bear thinking about

'How many years now since dad.....?'

'Eight. Yes, it'll be eight years this autumn since Charles died.'

I look at my mother. She is sitting forwards and her shoulders are
slightly hunched. She looks vulnerable, almost childlike.

let sleeping dogs lie

A code passed on from mother to daughter.

My mother sighs and gathers up the trappings of granny hood, those
passports back into the life of the young: the useful knitting, the handbag full of
sweets. I follow her and we both go up to bed, bumping awkwardly into each
other on the landing. As I pass her bedroom door, I see her undressing. She has
taken off her blouse and skirt and stands in her slip. Slim, satin straps passing
over gently sloping shoulders.

The moon comes in at my bedroom window. It falls across my bed and
onto the chest in the corner. In the drawer is a photograph. I take it out and
hold it up into the moonlight. My father's face is caught in the beam.

As a child I watched young women – shop assistants, waitresses – succumb to my father's charm. I adored the shape of his head, the straightness of his back and the beauty of his hands - a fine man, slipping a folded, white, cotton handkerchief into his trouser pocket, flicking his turn-ups out over his ox blood brogues.

'Let me come with you daddy. I will keep up, I will, please let me come.' Running, breathless, hopping abreast of the knife creases and the swinging turn-ups. He is upright; he will not bend to me. I see only the tweed of a sleeve and the tip of a shoulder.

'I'm keeping up daddy – look!'

At last he spins on the ball of his foot, takes my hand and we go in. Roasting coffee, a table overlooking the market. The waitress is so kind to me. It's because of my father. When exhaustion tips the milk past my mouth and in to my lap she doesn't mind, she enjoys fussing around him. She is kind to me, even though I have made such a mess.

I look more closely at the photograph. I lean forwards across the shaft of moonlight and throw the photograph into shadow. I move and try again, but the light is always behind me. I consider walking over to the window, but then there is a sound from the adjoining room. My youngest son dreams and cries out. I go in to him. He is fast asleep. Long, black lashes sweep his cheeks. He will be a handsome devil, just like his grandfather. I wonder - will he run away from me too? Charlie left his widowed mother to the care of his brothers and sisters and escaped to London where he spent the depression charming the

landladies to give him credit. When the war came, he joined the RAF for love of the uniform, for the romance of the wings and because the training takes so long,

'The war will be over in a year.'

But it isn't and so he has to fly. The pilots pick their own crew. My father is soon chosen. A fine gunner, reliable, good old Charlie, you can depend on him. Late back from a mission, he finds his brogues already missing from his locker. They all coveted Charlie's brogues and his hairbrush, or was it really his hair? Waves to make you seasick, despite the short back and sides.

Then one mission no one came back. A lone parachutist falls and burns like Icarus. Oh my handsome father, will he ever look the same again? Of course, he has the luck of the devil. They cover his burnt face with ointment and bandages. He looks like the invisible man. Missing presumed dead? No, just starved in the prisoner of war camp and then sent home - thinner, but just as handsome and ten years younger. How could that happen? Easily.

'It was after the war, things were different then.'

Papers were lost, men lied, my father did. You have to be under forty for bomber crew. Charlie lied and came back a hero. My upright father who would not bend to me, stooped to this and a lifetime of

keeping things under wraps

'When did he tell you mum?'

'He didn't, he had to retire, that's when I found out.'

'Not before then? He kept it secret all those years!'

things like that don't bear thinking about

My mother's sustained unwillingness to be introspective. She brushes aside emotional discomfort.

I will not speak of my father again this visit. I dare not. I almost left the photograph on her bedroom wall. It shows my father on a boat with his arm around a woman's shoulders. He is very young and the woman is not my mother.

let sleeping dogs lie

A code passed on from mother to daughter.

All my father's brothers and sisters are in the photograph, they look happy and carefree, but already, even at this age, my father looks more guarded.

'Why daddy, why must you walk so fast?'

My son continues to sleep his innocent sleep. Such long eye lashes, such sensuous lips. I should go back to my bed, but the moon is on it - the moon that moves the tides and frosts the air. It chills my bed and I shiver and remember the inscription on the back of the photograph: 'Gladys - first wife'

My father drove a cab. He did 'the knowledge'. The streets of London are etched into his mind, but his first wife is forgotten, wiped out of history. He loses her before he loses the ten years. At twenty-one married and married again to my mother at thirty-one. But twenty years pass in between. How could that happen? Easily.

'It was before the war, things were different then.'

Things like secret pregnancies and weddings that only took place three weeks before the baby was born. Such things were

kept under wraps

alright. Oh yes!

'So that's why you went to London daddy.'

Skipping, keeping up. Running, breathless, hopping abreast of the knife creases and the swinging turn-ups.

The hair curls on my son's forehead. Will it wave like his grandfather's? Will he charm the ladies too? I saw how they flocked to my father. They came to him and alighted on his beautiful hands like pigeons in Trafalgar Square. He is popular with children too, with all his pupils. For, by some sleight of hand....

'things were different after the war'

.....he has joined that most respectable of professions. He teaches right from wrong to other people's children as well as his own. He rides a bike, has leather patches on his elbows, two lovely girls and a devoted wife. At work he has a reputation for fairness. At home on Sundays he divides the apple pie carefully into four equal pieces.

But twenty lost years? My father walks briskly on. My father has 'the knowledge' but what do we know? About Gladys? About my mother? And in between? Another wife that's what. Lost in London, wandering somewhere on the underground. A shadowy figure feeding the pigeons in Trafalgar

Square. Not even a photograph, an arm around the shoulders; not even a face to put a name to.

My father spins on the ball of his foot, takes my hand and we go in. Roasting coffee, a table overlooking the market. Exhaustion tips the coffee past his mouth and into his lap. The waitress is so kind, she doesn't mind, she enjoys fussing near my father. She is kind to him even though he has made such a mess.

I tuck the sheet in round my sleeping son and go back to my bedroom. The moon still haunts it. I pick up the photograph and take it to the window. In the moonlight I can see that my young father looks weary of it all, even before he has started. Is Gladys already pregnant? He looks too tired to say. Are there any more children? Did he divorce his second wife before he married my mother? Is he bigamous? Are my sister and I illegitimate? I'm tired too. These things have kept me awake too often. I tell myself it's too late, would be cruel to tell my mother now.

'How many years now since dad...?'

'Eight. Yes, it'll be eight years this autumn since Charles died.'

And how long do I have...

to keep things under wraps

...to keep this heritage of secrets which perhaps you already know?

Why else would you have taught me so well?

to let sleeping dogs lie

A code passed on from mother to daughter.

My mother's sustained unwillingness to be introspective. She brushes
aside emotional discomfort.

things like that don't bear thinking about

A Looped Footage

Thursday 20th March – It has begun. I listened to the news broadcasts most of the day. Later I wanted to make omelettes, but we'd run out of eggs. Our supermarket used to stay open until ten, but they're in financial difficulties and recently they've started shutting at seven. It was well past that, so I had to go to the deli on the corner. I met several people I knew there, but we didn't discuss the news. We discussed the supermarket. It's an American conglomerate and their prices are high, the other supermarket giants are circling, putting in take-over bids. We all had our brand preference, our favourite to succeed. On the way home I worried about my eggs. There was no sell-by-date on the carton and I usually buy organic. Oh well, 'in times of war', as my mother would say.

Tuesday 25th March – Sixty mile an hour winds whip across the Iraqi desert. Baghdad is covered with a layer of sand and dust so thick that passing cars leave tyre tracks, like those left in heavy snow. Visibility is down to a few metres and a sickly ochre light shrouds the city. In the surrounding desert, the best-equipped army in the world has been stopped in its sand-clogged tracks. Within hours its soldiers have become indistinguishable from their enemy. They too wrap scarves around their heads and across their noses and mouths. Only their eyes are visible, squinting into the distance, blinking away the flying grains.

Friday 28th March - This morning I used the last of the toothpaste. Over the years I have got into the habit of buying fluoride to safeguard the children's teeth, my own being so weak and inadequate. I wanted to spare them my traumas: the humiliation and pain of the dentist, the fear of falling teeth. To dream of this was, according to Freud, to fear loss of sexual potency. Mine regularly fell out, in my dreams and otherwise. I wanted to spare them that, so I 'bought them protection' as the adverts say.

Today, however, browsing the supermarket shelves, I found myself toying with whiteners. They've come down in price, affordable now, but do they work on crowns I wonder? Would I be left with some piano key effect as the whiteners worked on my natural teeth but scorned the artificial? Who could I ask? I couldn't display such vanity to my dentist. Nor could I parade my inadequacy in the tooth line to my friends. Stumped, I bought fluoride again, even though my children are now happily abusing and neglecting their teeth, just like any other self-respecting teenagers.

Imagine me though before I pick up the familiar tube. See me standing in the supermarket aisle recollecting all my teeth-crumbling dreams, revisiting the sweating terror as I spat them out in my hand, as I felt them wobble against my tongue, or bend under the pressure of a crust. We do retain that memory of the loose milk teeth, of the not unpleasant slight ache as you wriggled them back and forth. I stood considering this and suddenly saw Freud's point. I

wandered off into the meat aisle thinking about shopping and fucking. Perhaps they are one and the same. Maybe the comfort of buying is pure sublimation and, even leaving aside the toothpaste issue, a fixation on the oral: the wish to consume substituting for the phallic.

I decided it didn't bear even as close examination as I'd paid to the toothpaste brands. Ten minutes of my life on freshness, mintiness, on gentle, deep cleansing, while behind all that hygiene the hot, dark, saliva-drenched hole of my tongue and gums glints and shifts ceaselessly.

Today forty people were killed in an Iraqi market. They were shopping even though there's a war on. As the scud missiles hurtled through the air they made their purchases. The reporter explained that these ordinary people needed to carry on their everyday lives: to eat, to buy and sell. His commentary was accompanied by film footage of Basra market in happier times: baskets loaded with fresh fruit and vegetables, a man showed a small child a tethered chicken, brightly coloured fabrics draped the stalls. It was an ancient scene. One might be tempted to forget the supermarkets, which are bound to lurk in the background, perhaps on the edges of the town. There they will be, sporting the same car parks, the same logos and with the same common brand names on offer. A quick scan of the shelves could probably find familiar toothpaste tubes bearing the same list of active ingredients. The same gunk ready to be spread on Iraqi tooth brushes, the same rinsing and spitting, the quick tongue around

the lips and the same inevitable gaze to the self in the mirror before leaving, breath-fresh, to start another day.

Saturday 29th of March - I went back to the supermarket and counted the toothpaste on offer. Thirty-one, and that was just the tubes. All in all there were forty-nine oral hygiene products: toothpaste in tubes and pumps: toothpaste for smokers, for those with sensitive gums. There was herbal, bicarbonate of soda, liquid gel, pearl drops and whitening. There was even special toothpaste for children with its own primary colour packaging. Moving along the shelves I counted thirteen mouthwashes and six different types of floss. There were toothpicks and oral care strips, which dissolve in your mouth and give 'over an hour's fresh breath protection'. You could buy dental gum in peppermint or menthol, denture fixes and sterilizers. Brand names recurred again and again and I wondered whether, as with clothing retailers, there are a couple of big names behind them all. Two giants competing for market share, taking turns on special offers. I wondered if, for them, Iraq was a new battlefield. I wondered who was gaining ground in that fight.

Sunday 30th of March - On the news they said that if the British and American troops take too long to get into Basra, many of the people in the city will starve to death. One reporter commented that the siege is one of the most ancient and one of the cruellest forms of warfare. It is particularly damaging to civilian life. I have always pictured the walls of Jericho as white and sheer, like a set of rather chalky teeth.... 'and the walls came tumbling (or crumbling)

down'. When Jericho was taken it was burnt to the ground. Only the gold, silver, brass and iron were kept and taken 'into the treasury of the Lord'. I think they call oil liquid gold?

Tuesday 1st April - The UN says, with the hot season approaching, any besieged communities will soon run out of water. I called in to the supermarket but avoided the oral hygiene section. Entering the store I saw a large notice urging customers to fill 'shoeboxes full of goodies' for our armed forces. As with other 'special offers' this 'great opportunity' was limited to 'only one per customer'.

The television shows us tanks in the desert. They look purposeful and lost, present and timeless. Tanks in the desert, tanks in the desert. One tank, many tanks. A looped footage. Dust thrown up into someone's dry mouth, grinding against their teeth, more abrasive than any paste. Just the thought makes you feel thirsty.

One night a friend and I were forced to camp rough. We only had one plastic bottle of water and there was fierce argument about whether some of this should be wasted on tooth cleaning. I remember we compromised on half a cupful for the whole ablution. To my surprise it proved more than adequate.

Thursday 3rd April - The American forces are said to be only six miles from Baghdad. They are already discussing who or what will replace the existing regime, the vacuum at the centre.

After the Second World War dentists had a policy of encouraging as many people as possible to opt for a full set of dentures. They would pull all the teeth out on the same day and have the brand new porcelain ready and waiting to slip into their place. I came home one day to a transfigured mother. I can see her now standing in the open door way smiling vampire-like, the blood oozing down over her new, gleaming dentures.

The weather has been particularly good since the war began. Clear blue skies and vapour trails. The planes fly so high, you can't hear them. They are transatlantic flights, we live directly under the flight path to America.

Sunday 6th April - 'Sunday, sweet Sunday with nothing to do'...except shop The supermarket shrine is open until four. I bought bread, a sliced white and a granary and a Sunday paper. The headlines screamed of a bloodbath on the streets of Baghdad. Hells' teeth! Bread and wine, the body and blood of Christ. He knew how to exploit the essential symbolism of food and drink: loaves and fishes, water into wine. When I got home the news on the radio was more of the same. I tuned in to another station where there was a program about British Indians who are operating the caste system in this country. An untouchable became a Labour MP, but claims he was sabotaged by local Brahmins and lost his seat. He moved to another constituency where there were no Indians and where he has been successfully re-elected year after year. The papers also noted that our British soldiers fight well on the streets of Baghdad, especially those who have served in Northern Ireland. They are used

to the potentially lethal mix of soldiers and civilians, snipers and religion, belief, barricades and babies. They know about checkpoints and guns stored in the basement or garden. They hunted for hand grenades under the church pews and they'll search for them under the mosque prayer mats. While they're doing it they're also less likely to panic and shoot each other, as some of the American troops seem prone to do.

I hurt my mouth on the granary bread. I've had a heavy cold and my gums are sensitive and sore.

Monday 7th April - There's a discount shopping centre about ten miles out of town. It buys up cheap imports, seconds and bankrupt or damaged stock. On the main road a sign calls the shopping centre a 'Leisure Park'. When you get there you can see a few bedraggled ducks sitting in stagnant pools looking bored. The owner takes up a whole page of the local paper each week with his advertising. The special offers have jokey headlines. Compost is listed under 'Another Load of old Rot', fabric under 'Cut to Ribbons' and lawnmowers and strimmers under 'Restore Lawn and Order.' But this light-hearted tone is undercut by his editorial. It is pure bile, usually against all things European, but occasionally straying into random racist and anti-gay propaganda. I remember one week it inexplicably resorted to nautical metaphor, urging its readers to 'go for'ard', to 'let go aft and leave Europe to sink under its bureaucracy and past rivalries'.

Over the years I've bought three sets of blue and white Chinese rice bowls, large, medium and small. They've all got some minor fault, but you can sort through for the least damaged. Every time I get them out I worry about whether they were made in some forced labour camp. I didn't think about that when I bought them, I just thought they were very cheap

I hate myself whenever I succumb to the lure of the 'Leisure Park' bargains. When I go I lash myself with the twenty or more signs, which greet customers as they drive in. Hand painted notices forbidding you to do this, park here, let your children do that. Today they're festooned with lots of 'Support our Troops' stickers and Union Jacks. I stole a notebook and a pen, which I'm using right now.

Wednesday 9th April – Yesterday they stormed Saddam's main palace in Baghdad. We saw soldiers running up the imposing staircases, incongruously reflected in vast, gleaming mirrors that had previously witnessed only lavish parties and formal concerts.

In Manchester the BBC Philharmonic played an especially composed piece of music. The composer wanted to break down some of the elitism and inaccessibility that surrounds contemporary classical music, so he wrote it to be performed in a supermarket. Some of the staff took part. They were located around the store and played found instruments made from objects they had taken from the 'Home Wares' section. Customers were invited to comment.

Some found it droll; others interesting, several felt it distracted them from their shopping.

Thursday 10th April - I was eating jelly babies, biting their heads off and trying not to think about the sugar coating, which was in the process of transferring itself to my teeth and gums. As I picked one up it reminded me of the recent images from Baghdad. A group of young men were pulling down the statue of Saddam. The commentator used the word 'toppled', dictators are always 'toppled', but in this case the actual fall seemed even less dramatic than that. The statue had jelly babyish tendencies and as they dragged it down it slumped over as if suddenly tired or drunk. The whole thing suggested bungled indignity, rather than high drama. The fallen idol resembled that model clown outside our local McDonald's which the local lads like to level on a Friday night, rather than those heroic fallen statues of Stalin. I bit the head off the jelly baby and then went to clean my teeth.

Friday 11th April - Looting is widespread. Men run out of shops carrying computers. The hospitals recruit armed guards to protect them.

On the local television news a woman brought up fifteen miles from here, now fifteen years in Basra, harangues a soldier. She says the jails have been opened and the looters are criminals. She tells the soldier he must do something to stop them. Her accent is familiar and she's very angry. Behind her people continue to run past, kicking up the dust. They are carrying every kind of portable commodity. I didn't run out of the 'Leisure Park' with my

notebook and pen, I strolled out, making a note of the sign at the exit. It was held by a life-sized cardboard policeman. He points at customers and reminds me of that First World War poster featuring a recruiting sergeant and the slogan, 'Your country needs you.' Instead this policeman invites any shoplifter to 'a ride in his police car'. I didn't run out because I was just stealing not looting. Looting has its own history, like siege. The activity remains, only the goods change. Behind the angry woman another man runs out of a shop carrying a ghetto blaster and I list the words in my stolen notebook: pillage, plunder, sack, spoil. The spoils of war: spoilage - that which is left. What is left? Tikrit?

Since the jelly babies a molar in my lower jaw has started to ache. Nothing serious, but I find my tongue straying around its perimeter, soothing and searching for the source of the pain. When I went to bed it seemed to get worse, so I got up, borrowed my son's battery operated toothbrush and gave it a good scrub. I returned to bed and dreamed of falling statues. Friends, pop stars, old teachers, athletes and politicians, cast in bronze or carved in stone, crashed down from their various plinths one after another.

Saturday 12th April - The looting is no longer restricted to criminals. Now everyone's at it. Today the television showed a man dragging a table along the street. Large and of a modernist design, the table legs consisted of two wooden rectangles set at either end. It set my teeth on edge to watch him drag it through the dust, to see the edges of the wood juddering as they grated on the

stones. We were too far away to see clearly, but it looked like an expensive table. He was obviously anxious to get it safely away. I imagined the wood splintering, the high quality veneer flaking off. I wanted to shout 'Lift it, don't drag it like that! Can't you see the damage you're doing!'

I had ice cream for my supper and my tooth rang with clear pain for at least an hour. I flossed all round it before going to bed and the water was bloody when I rinsed.

Monday 14th April – Still very sunny. It has been so dry for so long that a few light showers in the south left dust deposits. Everyone hopes the fine spell will continue until the bank holiday weekend.

At the supermarket there was a special offer on mouthwashes: two for five pounds. The bottles contained a two-tone, clear liquid. At the top it was blue, at the bottom green. The user was instructed to shake the bottle VIGOROUSLY until the two liquids fused into one overall colour. The mouthwash claimed to absorb bacteria and debris.... debris!.... to provide 'eighteen hours fresh breath confidence'. If I'm honest I was less impressed by these promises and more seduced by the cheap offer and the childish wish to shake the two colours together. I resisted the temptation to do it in the shop, managing to distract myself with a range of toothbrushes whose handles were moulded in the shape of multicoloured, miniature Disney monsters: a single-eyed frog, a girl wearing a hat bearing two round eyeballs, a turquoise bear and a purple lizard. For some reason they too reminded me of the jelly baby statue.

I read yesterday that whilst Saddam was being cut off at the knees, looters were doing the same to ancient statues from Nineveh and Babylon. As Ronald McDonald's double keeled over, their stone heads rolled around the floor of the Iraq museum. The looters entered this supermarket of history and just helped themselves.

My tooth aches all the time now, a dull throbbing which intensifies with the application of heat or cold. I discover my tongue circling frantically, I'm beginning to suck the tooth for relief. Last night it kept me awake for hours, so early this morning I made an emergency appointment with the dentist. I'm going now to see what can be done.

Iraq: the cradle of civilization

My tooth: a cradle of pain

Tuesday 15th April – Another sleepless night. The dentist drilled and filled, but thinks I may need a crown. My cheek feels hot and I think it looks swollen. The pain seems to have moved into the bone of my jaw. It could be just a reaction to the dentist's work or an abscess perhaps? It's hard to think about anything else, but I watched the television news. The looting continues in Baghdad and Basra, children join in. A man pushed a television balanced on a desk chair across a road. He looked up and down the road before crossing and suddenly I saw the wheeled television as a physically disabled person, watching but reliant on others: alert but inert.

Friday 16th April (Good Friday!) – Helicopters criss-cross the desert, flying low over the tank tracks and obliterating them. They are searching for the ‘weapons of mass destruction’ and for Saddam himself. Search and destroy - the basic technique of modern warfare. Search and destroy - the same technique used in dental treatment. Find the rot and drill it out. Stop the hole with sterile packing. Problems only arise when the decay has not been completely eradicated, or when a gap is left between the dentine and the filling.

Meanwhile, the good weather holds. Record temperatures for April of over twenty-seven degrees in the Midlands. I went on the Internet and found out that the average temperature for Baghdad at this time of year is twenty-nine with record temperatures reaching forty.

I no longer know which tooth is hurting. The whole side of my mouth throbs to the insistent pulse of the helicopter blades. I think I may be running a temperature, but it’s hard to tell in this heat. My jaw is clearly swollen though; the skin looks shiny and pillowy like fine silk. The dentist is shut for Easter so I’ll have to make it through until Tuesday. I think I’ll manage, the supermarkets will open tomorrow and a recent ruling allowed them to extend their franchise to sell patented painkillers.

Saturday 17th April – I bought liquid capsules for ‘quick absorption’ and ‘targeted relief’. I read the packets through a haze of pain and wondered: what is the difference between a capsule and a caplet, a tablet and a meltet?

Tuesday 22nd April – My tooth is removed. I am light-headed from the multiple injections required to make the operation pain free. I am light-headed *because* I am pain free. As the dentist wrenched out the offending stump the stench given off sent him reeling. As I left the surgery the blood on my handkerchief was a vibrant, rich red and I was heartened by the healthiness of its colour and flow. The hole in my mouth is a bombed out crater where my tongue searches for any remaining shrapnel fragments. Ragged and gaping, it collects an unlikely amount of food each time I eat, but I use the mouthwash to flush it out three times a day and wait happily, expectantly for healing to begin.

After a short spell of cool, cloudy weather, the skies have brightened again. American planes drop leaflets telling the Iraqis to 'be patient.' Children go up to the US soldiers, smile, and swear at them in Arabic. When the troops assume they are being friendly the children are delighted. It's their favourite game.

Yesterday Shia pilgrims marched to Kerbala. They went to mourn Imman Hussein, grandson of the prophet Mohammed who died there in battle in AD 680.

Friday 25th April – Distant thunder during the night. Persistent driving rain sweeps across my window. For a while all seemed well in my mouth, but I woke this morning to find the pain was back. I got up and went to the bathroom. In the mirror I saw a lopsided hamster. My cheek has progressed from pillowy silk to the colour and texture of an over-ripe apple.

Monday 28th April – Today demonstrators gathered at a school just outside Baghdad. They said they just wanted the occupying US troops to leave so that the local community could use their school again. A stone was thrown, or not: stones are always thrown, or not. In any case the troops opened fire with the usual results: shards of bone, ripped flesh, the indelible stain of blood on concrete, ghastly silence, a woman hunched over a body her fist stifling a screaming sob, which marches to Kerbala and back through history's line of permanently mourning women.

Low pressure systems from the North Atlantic prevail. It has been raining for days. I feel unreasonably and absolutely depressed. I went to the supermarket but felt so dizzy and disorientated I had to sit down on a metal seat by the automatic door. Customer Services came to see if I was all right and tried to sell me some brandy. It was their own brand and very reasonably priced, but I refused, made a dignified exit and drove straight home. My jaw is chronically infected. The ravages of the rotten tooth have weakened my whole system and I will only recover with help. My dentist has prescribed a long course of antibiotics, but he will not estimate how long I may have to wait for them to take effect. He tells me to get plenty of sleep, to eat well, but I find neither easy. Everything tastes tainted and at night I have troubling dreams. Last night I dreamt that the hole left by my pulled tooth grew bigger and engulfed my whole mouth, then my head and finally my entire body, until I was nothing but a huge and terrible wound, which collapsed from the knees

onto the sandy ground, soaking in rapidly, disappearing and then reappearing, disappearing and then reappearing, over and over again.

I am sure there will be an end to it, but at the moment nothing consoles me. I mourn the loss of my tooth, I feel ruined and lonely. My mouth is a site of such devastation and trauma that I cannot imagine kissing and this fact alone seems to have deprived me of the possibility of love.

Starting Up the Car

driving home is written approximately two years after *The/My Female Voice*. I am further into my research and it is a more developed and integrated attempt to work across descriptive and analytical modes. It pursues the notion of an autobiographical methodology concerned with reflecting and creating. If *The/ My Female Voice* contextualises my writing practice, *driving home* concentrates more on the activity of writing. In the act of writing *driving home*, I attempt to generate knowledge of how I write. *driving home* does this by charting various influences on my writing, whilst simultaneously giving an account of its personal history and manifestation. *driving home* contains references to everyday objects and occurrences. A range of characters populates *driving home*: existing, historical and fictional, all of them are given equal weight and value. I cite influential media incidents and objects of cultural production. I quote myself alongside others, collide incidents and objects and time frames in an attempt to dissolve the boundaries between fact and fiction, personal and impersonal, private and public, poetic writing and analysis.

The text also makes reference to a humanist versus post-modern polarization in thinking. It is concerned to suggest, both in its form and in some of its content, that the division between the two is less rigid than many might suggest.

Mariana Valverde gives a useful perspective in her comments on Foucault's attitude to truth:

The activity of dialoguing (even with oneself) to probe our actions and to account for them by sharing personal stories, self-criticisms, longings, and hopes is not the monopoly of that long confessional tradition that goes from Jean-Jacques Rousseau through 1960's pop psychology to Oprah Winfrey. Truth telling [...] also takes place in situations that promote a less "deep" and serious sense of self, a more pragmatist, flexible, de-centred, less territorialized ethical self.

In *driving home* I am experimenting with a different kind of autobiographical writing – one that accepts that different kinds of truth exist in the same way as different identities can co-exist in one person.

Mariana Valverde uses the phrase 'ethical heterogeneity' to describe this plural, ethical self and refers to Foucault as a pragmatist for whom 'ethics was a matter of practice' (Valverde in Taylor and Vintges (Eds.) p71- 77). *driving home* is included here as part of a practice-based demonstration of my commitment to notions of practice and pragmatism.

driving home⁵²

*driving home*⁵³ I passed A who is as serious as I could never be and I thought 'screaming my head into dust' which is me speaking in tongues, or rather trying to be some version of her – awful – calamitous and fit for nothing – I will thief any voice and then apologise for it, as if it is mine – and even when daisy chaining it around my throat like some fragile necklace to wear to parties, or other occasions when another voice is required, I will pick off its petals and drop them randomly – 'a patch of blue, a piece of sky' ⁵⁴ – 'how dare you!' she would say

I answer with ease, for dialogue is my forte and as a child I was never allowed to answer back – so now I am making the most of it, while I am still in sound mind – which to be honest is hardly ever as I am too busy being calamitous aka Jane, she singing of the Deadwood Stage and Kansas city locations, of which I know very little, just that 'everything is doing fine' in the latter and Deadwood reminds me of Tundra and returns me to my Geography class, descending feet first into my desk, which is cast iron in origin, the seat bolted to the desk top – a set of raddled wood slabs (themselves almost geographical in feature) with a hole for the ink container – what is that called? are even common nouns escaping me now? still, Tundra remains – balls of

⁵² Please be reminded that when I quote from other texts I have authored, this is indicated in **bold type** in order to distinguish my writing from other referenced sources.

⁵³ Edited version of *driving home* published in *Texts Bones* (2005) Skrev Press.

⁵⁴ *The Moment Before* – Script for Live Performance, Rehearsed Reading (2004) Cockpit Theatre.

dead twigs technically known as scrub – bowling through a parched land/
scape

A Secret Love, I was not concerned with at 6 (considering it a sloppy
alternative to Jane's range riding and thigh slapping energetics) though I have
used the first four lines since to refer to my father, who specialized in this kind
of liaison, a fact which I found both laudable and disorientating, as he would
never let me answer back – so I am stuck with his version, even though I know
there is another, laid out by my sister in a café in Hyde Park – the evidence is
before you members of the jury in black and white, or rather lacily pierced
through by sun falling onto the cast iron table top, giving the birth and
marriage certificates a lyrical feel, even though they contain the boxed evidence
of his lies – doctored ages, names and partners

in Hyde Park the spring sun is making little impact, my hands are cold –
'cold, cold hands' ⁵⁵ Rodin is dying in his house in Meudon where all the
radiators have broken – his studio (says Rilke) ⁵⁶ is white – white casts and walls
and high windows, like these here in the café – Rodin's studio blinds Rilke and
I am blind to my sister's evidence – as blind as my latest woman, she can see
nothing – JH laughed, I don't blame him, I laughed too – nothing? – well, fancy
that – not much I must say

I have also written her seated, she can't move – easily – though when she
does she doesn't totter, an action I have been accused of by women who knew

⁵⁵ *Tracings*, Script for Live Performance, Rehearsed Reading (2002) Dartington College of Arts.
Full version see pp221-270.

⁵⁶ Greene, J. Bannard and Norton, Herter (Trans.) *Letters Of*, Rainer, Maria, Rilke 1892-1910
(1945) pp79 N.York, WW. Norton and Co.Inc..

better – high heels were never my forte, even that pair of white net sling backs bought at the Airbourne Factory Shop in Anstey – tight skirts, however, were – I had the boyish hips for them... once, which brings me to mohair sweaters and apricot tan stockings and cotton wool stuffed into the tips of my uplift bra – or not – clothing rarely interests me enough (as you can see) though fancy dress does – give me chaps and fringed buckskin, tooled boots and colourful kerchiefs

MM could arrange it – I met her shopping for cowgirls in TKMAXX's clearance section – though, on second thoughts, she might despise my appropriation I steal voices, clothes and pens – GW knows I shoplift, as do all the readership of *Tears in the Fence*, a journal in which I stole a notebook and pen, which I'm using right now ⁵⁷ is published – fiction but also factual, dated in many senses – the time has passed – but the name of the journal I still cannot bear to pronounce in the lachrymose version – a potential for pathos which slightly embarrasses me – stealing pens and notebooks is better than stealing emotion – that is a real crime

my stealing justifies my menopause (rather than common usage, which would have it the other way round) shoplifting is the prerogative of a menopausal woman, I can claim it as a symptom, I need stealing to prove my transition – that I am only passing through – shoplifting is an excuse for my calamitousness and Archie Andrews-style ventriloquism

⁵⁷ *A Looped Footage*, short prose, published, *Tears in the Fence* 40 (Spring 2005) full version included earlier in this section pp67-82.

imagine! ventriloquism on the radio – what a coup! Inspirational

I was brought up with such insights, they explain my silliness, though Leicester is even more to blame – in this location, through my teens, I practised daftness with an assiduousness which bears no comparison:

site specific daftness

a transferable skill

a trans-locatable attribute

a geographical feature of my psyche which rivals my nose in dimension

I like slapstick and bad jokes – it is a legacy I have tried to pass on to my children, I made them study Buster Keaton, Charlie Drake, Norman Wisdom, Harry Worth and later Jacques Tati, to whom C and I paid homage on our first date (film theatre, North Staffs Poly – hands up if you were there) this was a good way to start a relationship – and even now I practise wasp batting whilst bike riding – it is the reason I cannot send my sister's forty year old bike to the dump – the Hercules handlebars are essential

which reminds me of the state of the garage – dust ridden car boot boxes, trampled old clothes, a blue plastic shoe last size 9 courtesy of SP, wood stored for C's garden furniture projects, half a bottle of windscreen wiper additive, bent angle brackets for shelves, old doors in various sizes, lego, jigsaw puzzle pieces, rotted wind breaks – they all further remind me that my mother is coming and I have not cleaned the house – the fridge smells of mould and so

does the car – I am paralysed by smells and rotten food – there is nothing for it
but to put on some perfume and hope for the best

I will move quickly about the place and be vivacious

I will try not to secrete and laugh vigorously

I will provide distractions: great-grandchildren, meringues, new technology

I will do some cavalier flaunting

I will abandon my roundhead companions of many years and doff feathers

I will do anything rather than clean

like Tallis I will put down more newspaper, a whole new layer, and I
will write my political treatise before laying my head on the kitchen table to
weep – when I sit up again, unseen, small creatures will scuttle under the
cupboards and Iris ⁵⁸ will laugh and clap and declare it a fairly honourable
defeat⁵⁹ at which point we will all sleep and dream of Julius lowering the food-
encrusted plates into bowl after bowl of foaming, steaming water

later I will emerge from a filthy house wearing spotless designer casuals
and the street will cheer – even my mother will admit to being impressed and C
will kiss the back of my neck and then wipe the perfume off his lips with his
sleeve – in this way life will proceed with caution as long as no-one sniffs too
hard, or gets in the car, or goes to the fridge for some milk – yes, milk jugs will
save me – fine china – I have plenty, Stoke was my home in another life and
Wedgwood was cheap, we have cupboards full, only slightly stained with

⁵⁸ Murdoch, Iris

⁵⁹ Murdoch, Iris, *A Fairly Honourable Defeat* (1986) Harmondsworth, Penguin Books Ltd.

mouse droppings or the urine of those unseen creatures – I will light joss sticks in the car – Patchouli – which as I sit next to my mother, eyes on the road, will catapult me back 36 years to F in Acton dancing on his bed brandishing a can of RIGHTGUARD which he sprayed under his arms every morning in lieu of washing – he was thin as a rake until this year, when I saw him again, and he was unrecognisably clean

I will not clean – we did not do it, or spotless designer casuals – we were hippies and terrorised by the proximity of such things to godliness – ah where has secularism gone? down the toilet with chemicals, ruining our brains and eyesight and fertility (not that the latter is of any concern to me) especially as I realised tonight that my offspring could continue to breed – Jesus! one grandson is enough as a distraction, more will render me speechless as well as sightless – conjunctions as well as common nouns will evade me and I will be unable to join anything up – a life in letters – odd words will fly from me like confetti or Alphabetti Spaghetti – do they still make it? I bet not, I bet it is Disney characters now, or Star Wars – anything with a copyright – it's hard to make money out of the alphabet when it remains un-joined (unless you are a corporate logo) and even joined up some of us have difficulty in extracting any profit – we remain unpaid servants – I am a woman of letters, I have them to my name – it's just the copyright I can't secure – there is no safety pin of sufficient size and just speaking of safety sends Adele jittery – **'the safety aspects – big operation like this they forget the details see – we're**

overstretched on the details – the safety aspects’ ⁶⁰ and with that she’s off,
running like a hair’s breadth...

on the whole I conclude that I am exiled from my abilities, or lack of
them – it is constantly necessary to take myself unawares, only then can a
homecoming be achieved, only then do I come up against myself in a way that
doesn’t alarm

**She was losing her distance; things were getting too close.
She tried to tell him, but it made no sense when she said,
I just can’t seem to get far enough away.
For what? He asked.
To see. She replied.
See what?
Myself.** ⁶¹

if not unawares I begin the whole process of holding off – S does not do this
and invokes some jealousy, though I like her too much to let it ‘come between’
us – I am a martyr to my desire for control, the habit of obedience is hard to
annexe, it sneaks in while I am not looking and I find myself paring down to the
bone, getting rid of all the flesh, I was anorexic at sixteen – so to move from
reducing yourself to skin and bone, to doing the same with your prose is
progress... isn’t it?

oh horror I am indeed too close, how can I escape myself? my constant
fantasies of flight are perhaps an attempt: women with wings:

**.....but on such days, on such sweet spring days, when the dew
gathers on my fingertips. On such fine, blue days I can – always...
STANDS AND OPENS OUT A PAIR OF WINGS ...Fly. (PROUDLY)
They are my own wings. There is no artifice in them. EXAMINES**

⁶⁰ *An Act of Charity*, prose and script for live performance, rehearsed reading DCA (1995).

⁶¹ *Distance*, short prose, published *Feminist Review* 78 (2004), Appendix One ppxxiv-xxxi.

WINGS Some glue perhaps. SHAKES WINGS OUT But I will not deny them for a moment. I'm no angel, but that's another matter. The shaft of my feathers is my own affair – entirely. ⁶²

women dancing themselves into oblivion, women running full pelt...

She turned and began to run, feet pounding the boards, careless of the cracks. She ran with the silk slicked to her legs, with her head back and her eyes on the distance. ⁶³

women unleashed – though if I am honest I would not want to come completely apart at the seams – proliferation and abundance may never really be in my nature – I am more repressed with bursts of anarchy – it is these I pin my hopes on and all excitement requires a degree of calm to define it... doesn't it? – 'you have to have the quiet bits' someone said, but he was excusing his unwillingness to break free of a life predicated on restriction and repression – someone else said I was capable of anything – this man is now dead – and do I remain so able? even if I have drawn lines around myself, are they like the ones around my father's lies – longitudes that contained his lassitudes and after all geographical terms are prevalent these days – mapping, territories, contours – the word geography itself (pause for inkwells) but pluralized into geographies, locations, borders, which we are assured are porous and across which we are encouraged to bleed, elide, slip – slippage is a word I like because of its slapstick connotations, but another favourite – lenses (through which to view map references?) I cannot stand – it is the sound of it what one has to do with the lips, teeth and tongue – ghastly – a prissy half smile – diabolical, I cannot

⁶² *The True Aerialist*, monologue for live performance, prose version published *Feminist Review* 84, October 2006. This and full script in Appendix Three ppxcv-cxiv and cxv-cxxvi respectively. See also commentary and embedded text in section 'The True Aerialist' pp166-217.

⁶³ *Distance*, short prose, published *Feminist Review* 78 (2004) Appendix One ppxxiv-xxxi.

bear over sibilant s's – yessss, yessss – I will hang on to my sloppy mouthed
Leicester Yeah forever – I will die with it on my lips – 'You OK? Yeah.'

desire for control contains a conviction that organisation is the key – I am
an avid collector of storage solutions – boxes, files, envelopes, sets of small
drawers, clever shelving – I know there is something out there which will do
the trick and I know it is a trick to be mastered – this tidiness, this sense of order
– in the end though, despite my best efforts, everything migrates to the floor – I
am the opposite of single minded, I work constantly with fragments (certain
fragments?)⁶⁴ graffiti attracts me with its tags and throw ups and emotion
prevents me from completing my sentences

**A whole lifetime of mirrors and she had never... even as close
as she was now... had never... well I never... Thai.**⁶⁵

words fail me, I think in blanks, in parataxis⁶⁶

and then

I stop short

and then

I am pulled up

and the daisy chain around my neck changes into a set of pearls

day to day, I hate routine, the idea of ritual makes me feel faint, perhaps

this is why I look on regulation with wonder, my sister on the other hand is a

⁶⁴ Etchells, T.(1999) *Certain Fragments*, Contemporary Performance and Forced Entertainment, London, Routledge

⁶⁵ *Distance*, ibid

⁶⁶ Jespersen, Otto in Cameron D. (Ed.) *The Feminist Critique of Language* (1998) Routledge. Also 'aposiopesis' defined in the Random House Dictionary as 'a sudden breaking off in the midst of a sentence, as if from inability or unwillingness to proceed.'

mathematician, systems come easily to her, she is a talented teacher on the subject – I still remember the day our arithmetic teacher introduced words – a description of bath water running at a pint a second, the problem of multiplying football pitches, of the number of potatoes in a pound – I stared around the classroom, searched the faces of my classmates, they were attentive, unconcerned – I was lost, unable to understand why anyone should want to contaminate the purity of numbers with words, the very idea threw me into a panic from which I have never recovered – in my terror, I clung to mental arithmetic, geometry and algebra, I searched for internal logic, whilst individual numbers made free with my emotions – even ones were sympathetic, friendly, kind and well rounded, particularly 4, 16 and 32 the odds 3, 7 and 51 were uncomfortable, unstable, prickly and menacing and this still affects my attempts at knitting – knit rows give me pleasure, the purl ones just have to be endured

out of a potential for chaos emerges a desire to pursue order too ruthlessly – paring down to essentials can become self-defeating, a laurel on which to rest, or rather 16 laurels evenly placed at regular intervals for maximum comfort

and speaking of internal logic... as I do... often... to those making performance, to those struggling with composition, to those attempting to make the fragments into a whole, when we no longer even speak of wholes, only process – as a clue then to assemblage, to some kind of arrival

I am the collator, the interleaver, the networker, I am the one with the stitches to sew these pieces together: to take the fragments and make them into a whole. It is material evidence I have: material to the judgement on these women's lives. ⁶⁷

a recipe for cooking it up

CLARE – (ADDRESSING AUDIENCE) Overwrought am I? Did God overreach himself with me? Too much susceptibility here. An arbitrary imbalance there. The dough kneaded just too long so it dries and cracks and crumbles apart. Oh yes, I'd say I'm overwrought. A real thoroughbred! ⁶⁸

whilst I speak of internal logic, H speaks of combing – she combs her texts until nothing snags – I am capable of such tactics, tempted even when I would be better off waiting for what will surface, for what is insistent on being heard or written – often this is found in the spaces in between – there it lies almost invisible – overshadowed by those brilliant, hedonistic moments of pure invention and hysterical flair – these are tragic moments of doomed and misguided artistry, which I invariably and eventually discard, even while the other – put in for packing – a filler or a joiner – remains like a limpet only prepared to show its colours at high tide

you see! I am back to it, you see, how quickly I become re-enamoured of the old strategies of pruning and weeding, it is a tenacious tendency I have, one that surfaces with its own internal logic – I conclude that as a persistent trait it is well nigh uncontrollable and so I will have to work with it – but I am like a

⁶⁷ *Material Evidence*, script for live performance, rehearsed reading by South West Women's Arts Network (SWANN) at Exeter and Devon Arts Centre and the Salem Chapel, headquarters of SWANN (1989).

⁶⁸ *I Could Have Danced All Night*, script for live performance, opening stage directions. Rehearsed Reading (1987) by the Women's Section of the Royal Court Young People's Theatre, Arts theatre, London (1988). Full performance – Half Moon, Cockpit, Royal Court Theatre Upstairs + tour of London Schools + finalist Sherbourne Six Counties Festival.

socialist trying to exist within a mixed economy, vulnerable to corruptions, a tasty morsel to be swallowed up like the workers who disappear into the maw of *Germinal's* mine ⁶⁹

I must eat, I must, or... or die, or wilt and wither, or rot and decay, fester, fall into filth turn into tilth. Eat, eat, grow, grow, move, shift, no moss, no sweet rotting, no fullness of time fermentation, no rich matter, no mulch, eat, eat, grow, grow, move shift... ⁷⁰

for this reason I am sympathetic to those who resort to lists, I do it myself (as you are already aware), but know it is only a side step – a trick of the light – lists provide systems, non-narrative structures and are fabulously self promoting, but in the end they just sound like strategy – are transparently such and besides the idea of continual accretion palls... eventually – well, for me anyway – who needs more stuff? I have a house full and shopping has become a way of life, the only way to feel alive, we do it at our peril, partaking in the biggest con trick of all

partaking I am delighted with, it is such an apt word to describe this partial taking, it leads me to addiction and another list:

ii) I am addicted to small pieces of plain paper

a) the flaps of envelopes,

b) the spaces left around the text on a flyer handed to me in the street

c) the inside cover of my cheque book

I write on shopping receipts, the inside of fag packets, beer mats,

napkins, paper bags (though these are less available of late, as is that stiff

⁶⁹ Zola, E. (1968) *Germinal*, Harmondsworth, Penguin Books Ltd.

⁷⁰ *The True Aerialist*, *ibid*

toilet paper – hard on the back side, but I know it has saved some writer's
life) – I write now in an old, unused address book, my words run over the
vertical lines, which mark the columns and I enjoy the transgression
writing which is constant annotation
writing which takes place in the spaces between
writing over the lines, round the edges, in the interstices – a feminist
practice: pragmatic, necessary, oppositional – I write for whole seconds at a
time, moment on full moment, interruption by interruption ⁷¹– I write a
skipping dance, side-stepping 1) reasons why not 2) other options which may
apply – I write – a partial approach to which I am infinitely partial
which reminds me, I need a break, I need a breath of fresh air, I would
like to step outside, I would like to talk of weather – it is a fraught subject and
as such quite irresistible – I will begin with a betrayal – I know I am not alone
in my hurt, but bile is better discharged discreetly and it was a discreet
pleasure, clearly intoned, with an exquisite lack of emphasis – the ordinary
morning and afternoon naming of elemental forces and remote locations – a
radio reverie, at once comforting and thrilling, for those in peril on the sea,
lashed with rain, bobbing on the dark waves,

'Can you hear me? Can you hear me sailing by?'

we knew it was poetry, we did not need some 'poet' to tell us 'to find it'
as the colonial explorer found and named lakes and mountains which had been

⁷¹ Green, Tom, *UK Writer* (Autumn 2004), 'too many professional writers treat it like a hobby. They do two hours a day. It needs to be full time'.
'I write fragment because passing or instantaneous in the continuum.' Nicole Brossard, *The Aerial Letter* p42.

locally known and named for generations – it was a betrayal on a colossal and unforgivable scale, but, ah, there is more weather wise

The rain made a nice darkness, to cover up things. At the college the buildings were dark and deserted and calm, and the trees drooped down, waiting for it to stop raining. I worked hard, and at four o'clock it was still dark, so I put the lights on.⁷²

I will never be so 'young and sensitive' as Don ⁷³, so workaday familiar with the effects of rain, so lyric in my understanding, and this knowledge haunts any attempt I may make to expose my prose to atmospheric changes – I keep clear of weather, I stay dry and safe inside in this Camden fancy good importers where I hid for a month trying to find reasons not to get married – miss-typing *whether* one day, I looked up *wether* in the dictionary and the castrated ram, transposed into an order for 200 miniature tea sets, made me laugh out loud – a rare sound in an emporium devoted to cheap toys and conjuring tricks – my guffaw attracted the attention of a fellow temp, a clean shaven, decorous and decorative American – I shared my daft definition with him, but he refused to see the funny side – perceiving a challenge, I tried valiantly every evening thereafter to bring a smile to his darling lips ⁷⁴, but when, despite endless jokes, beer, witticisms and even ventriloquism, I failed miserably, the disappointment drove me to marry my childhood sweetheart – a doomed relationship, as he knew nothing of Americans, or castrated rams and

⁷² Robson, D. (1964), *Young And Sensitive*, Hutchinson & Co. Ltd. Winner of the Arthur Koestler Award (1964) for this novel written whilst a prisoner on Dartmoor.

⁷³ Robson, *ibid*.

⁷⁴ *America! America!* Appendix One, ppxvi-xii.

so, despite the longevity of our liaison and his willingness to laugh at my jokes,
did not fully realise what he had taken on

Whether the weather be fine
Or whether the weather be not
Whether the weather be cold
Or whether the weather be hot
We'll weather the weather
Whatever the weather
Whether we like it or not

this pair of failed relationships reminds me that I have ruthlessly under-
promoted myself, money has gone astray and I have dreamed of other things –
I can only comfort myself with the suspicion that everything I have written has
been in some respects an expression of life's longing for itself

driving home I passed a double decker bus parked in a field, the moon
was low and bright over the hills

driving home I had a think, but cannot recall what about, only that there
was time for my mind to get free for a moment or two, perhaps it was looking
at the moon that did it

**OPENS WINGS CEREMONIOUSLY AND VERY SLOWLY RISES
INTO THE AIR, HANDS PRAYING, ONE LEG CROOKED LIKE AN
ANGEL TO THE MUTED STRAINS OF A SILVERY BOY SOPRANO
SINGING A RELIGIOUS ANTHEM This is inspirational. The sky is
radiant. I fly – a silver meteor in its twinkling blueness! I fly – a
stainless shard piercing the velvet of night! I fly – a mote of mercury
beading the crested ocean! I fly... STARES BALEFULLY AT
AUDIENCE, DROPS WINGS Oh come on, it's allowed – a little
lyricism, a little lyric, a moment of romance – surely it's allowed?
FLAPPING WINGS BUT NOT GETTING VERY FAR
You can't deny poetry – my soul in verse, a version of my soul,
subversion of your soul, through my... LIFTS WINGS IN DRAMATIC
GESTURE... art!**

POSING WITH WINGS EXTENDED What an image, what an
imagining!
TURNING ROUND TO DISPLAY WINGS, SPEAKING OVER
SHOULDER Imagination being art.
OVER OTHER SHOULDER Some say.⁷⁵

But enough of this, it is a waste of time and it is the waste I cannot bear,
my post-war frugality is so firmly rooted it has become entirely instinctive
(why waste the habit of a lifetime?) I eat food I do not want: clearing plates was
never in question – I keep leftover scraps of food in the fridge for days:
throwing away was never an option – I keep burred screws in jars under the
stairs: coming in useful was always an option – I tuck small twists of string into
drawers already cluttered with dead lighters, dented ping-pong balls, crushed
biros and grubby sweatbands

I thought myself resigned to all those kettles, toasters, mixers, video
players, printers and TVs that are 'not worth' mending but then I watched a
documentary on impoverished Chinese communities illegally recycling
European electrical waste – burning pyres of plastic surround their villages and
the children suffer from asthma and chronic skin complaints – it confirmed my
suspicion

that waste is not without consequence

that throw away culture exists at someone's expense

that any war on profligacy should extend to my words

⁷⁵ *The True Aerialist*, *ibid.*

I must use short sentences and everyday words, I must not over punctuate or litter my prose with unnecessary adjectives or adverbs – in short – in the shortest I can manage – I must not use much to speak of little – but I will never keep entirely to my manifesto, I am infinitely subject to temptation – quite frankly, the sheer ignominy of getting from day to day requires a cautious recklessness which has to be indulged

this was most recently personified by DF and MG (New Year's eve 04/05) demonstrating that older women are particularly adept, being willing and able to exercise their skills on an impromptu basis and often incorporating a dancing practice⁷⁶ (they are still good little movers) and have all the moves available, being at the reflective end of a life of passionate, but pragmatic sexuality, often expressed within domestic parameters, where (incidentally) there is plenty of potential for slapstick (and farce) and even (if absolutely required) violence

Of the many possibilities knives have a secret appeal. Perhaps it's the romance again, plus I did once read that they were a particularly female weapon, accounting for the fact that whenever women do retaliate – against battering husbands for instance – they are more likely to do lethal damage. Women have an arsenal at their fingertips in every kitchen in the country, but they hardly ever use it. I'd like to, but I don't think I could. I haven't much strength in my hands and I can no longer lift my chin high enough to expose my throat for slitting.⁷⁷

after cooking an exquisite meal, incorporating venison (marinated 2 days),

⁷⁶ *What is it you wish to speak of?* digital film, 80 mins. Screened text05, Phoenix, Exeter DVD, Appendix Two pxc..

⁷⁷ *Friends* *ibid.*

mashed swede and lemon cheesecake, DF lifted her elbows and knees and danced on the Turkish carpet with restrained abandon – administratively nothing had ever remotely phased her – once someone flatteringly described us as alike – he said we both had an ability to suffer potential and proximate bombs with equanimity – it's not that we lack imagination, we are just eager to move on, to keep swimming lest we sink, for, even as we tango, the wet grime of single parenthood in Stoke on Trent glimmers a ghostly and ever present haunting

on the subject of recklessness – reckless repartee is an omnipresent temptation, spawned from a small facility and childhood rebukes (never allowed to answer back) – it is the pace I enjoy and the potential for surprise, the opportunity to confound expectations – JS once claimed she never knew what was coming next, I took this as a compliment, whilst knowing in my heart that I am all too easily seduced by my own arguments (especially when a quick fire routine can be obtained)

I stand accused by my own dialogue:

- B** What interests me is that moment before the scream
A Listen – listen to me a moment.
B What interests me is that moment.
C Before?
A Christ we're going to hit that!
B That moment before the car....
C What?
B Everything. Everything in that moment.
C A lifetime.
B How long?
C Oh 20 years, 30, 40 – 75 years.
A Looking at the driver.

B That's what interests me. ⁷⁸

I defend myself by saying 'but it's your words I love, your ways of saying'

driving home I spoke Jan's words⁷⁹ – terrible in their compassion – I could weep – I did – so I'll make the films even though the editing will do for my eyesight and will be ordinary at best – what is it you wish to speak of?⁸⁰
courage mostly

and here I come falling backwards in time, wheeling Matrix-like toward that first moment, settling into the soiled chair opposite a woman who speaks to me of unendurable events that have been enacted between the shag pile and the woodchip, posed against the Cotswold stone fireplace like the readers' wives in some soft porn mag – a leaking tap drips, steam rises from a rack of drying nappies, the gas fire pocks, she leans forward, her hands grasp her thin knees and she lists the damage – broken arm, fractured wrist, ruptured spleen, 'and the black eyes.....oh, the black eyes I've had.....'⁸¹

repeating and hesitating, words come slowly, ordinary words to describe extraordinary events, which are her commonplace – the banality of evil

⁷⁸ *The Moment Before*, ibid

⁷⁹ Jan Povey's contribution to *What Is It You Wish To Speak Of?* digital film, ibid

⁸⁰ *What Is It You Wish To Speak Of?* ibid

⁸¹ Transcripts of verbatim accounts included in final report for Department of Health and Social Security, Faragher and Faragher (now Bridger) 1980.

contained in trite phrases that, as I listen, start to vibrate, to pulsate, to resound with the horror of what they contain

the task? to do this justice? – to learn to write as she speaks direct to the what? truth? JH spoke of truth and I wouldn't have it, I asked for responsibility instead, but perhaps he was right

now then, things are getting serious and it is true that, despite my passion for the ordinary, I have, of late, found myself using the word 'banal' – it is not something I am proud of, but I am trying to draw a distinction between the sacred and the profane⁸², between the limiting and the limited

what is it then that I value? (if we can use that word without thinking of commercial viability, of pennies and pounds and fair weights) – those who speak of the struggle to be human in an inhumane world affect me – the self-confessed agent of observation, the watcher who is more of a reader – the attention payer, rather than the attention seeker and the most 'valued' – the reader of situations, the interpreter of moment, the builder who can bring together persons and events to reveal a lack of inevitability – a brick by brick constructor of lost momentum and misunderstanding – let betrayal be my subject or a final failure of nerve, or a chronic lack of reason and everything, let everything I write come to this:

a soldier present at the relief of Belsen makes the mistake of taking out a chocolate bar, immediately an inmate of the camp approaches him and pleads

⁸² Murdoch, I. (1974) *The Sacred And Profane Love Machine*, Harmondsworth, Penguin Books Ltd.

for a piece for his starving child, when the soldier gives it to him he runs
around the corner and eats it himself

now then, now then, things are getting even more serious, for now in
these words of children and chocolate, I speak again of inhumanity –
inhumanity – in such terminology is inevitably lodged the human, the shadow
of humanism and its friend essentialism, I could stand accused once more, but I
hop from foot to foot making the paratactical pearls bounce on my neck and as I
shimmy along the cracks and refuse to land in a clear square, my breasts
bounce painfully and these pearls threaten to knock my teeth out – I become
more unstable with every jump and make ready to fall, I am prepared to fall,
despite the depth of the pit – I will plunge down and not be ashamed of my
dive into despair, if I am to get anywhere it was necessary and I can always
climb out of this hole, the sides are steep but not crumbling yet, I can call and
they will drop down a rope

but even as I prepare to climb, I am tortured by the thought that – given
the pure indifference of fate and the loss of faith, is there any point in all this
striving towards some kind of.....what?

on the whole, would I not be better employed reviving anarchy, or
pursuing the lost avant-garde, or searching for a new hybridity or poetics? why
subsume such important matters under a wish 'to speak of'? I lean over the
table towards the former chief superintendent – I gaze into eyes, wet with the
evangelism of race relations and political correctness – he spoke movingly of

value-based leadership – I open my mouth and speak, I can hear my voice bouncing off the white tablecloth, and sounding on the fork tines – I say, ‘I’m sure Bush and Blair were convinced that they were using value based leadership when they persuaded us that the invasion of Iraq was not only necessary but just’ – he smiles politely, but I see it as PATRONage, the room starts to hum and shake and I speak again, more loudly this time, ‘God save us from those with God on their side!’

what am I thinking of? (speaking of?) what am I not thinking of?

and here I go again – I have sipped the bottle marked ‘drink me’ and I shrink back down until I am again standing in the door of our semi-detached house in Leicester, my hair is backcombed, my skirt is hitched up to my knickers and I am doing that adolescent shouting about some perceived injustice – she looks at me and says, ‘Who do you think you are? What makes you so special? Why is everyone else wrong? Why are you so right?’

C says that treating each other well is a form of self-preservation, but that only goes so far and does not account for the urge to art – maybe it is all selfishness, and to point your gaze towards others rather than yourself is just an act of marginalized cowardice – SW asked if I would answer my own question, ‘What is it you wish to speak of?’ and I said I had thought about it – felt a responsibility to do what I had asked others to do – she said, ‘only if you have something you wish to say’

weather wise, there is snow this year

driving home it coats the windscreen and I think of Marilyn Monroe in that B film, whose name I have never known, but which I saw as a young girl, or perhaps I have just imagined it – Marilyn peers through the windscreen, her cheeks are wet with tears, in despair, she turns off the wipers and the windscreen gradually fills

Arthur Miller spoke of the inevitability of Marilyn's decline – he supposed that her problems of self esteem and worth might be fulfilled by the successful completion of the film 'The Misfits' – she, of course, just got tired, felt she had failed, lost him and herself – perhaps task-based solutions are like that? but even if the sides of the dunes ⁸³ are steep and crumbling, I will still attempt to climb – what is the alternative? irony and slapstick are viable possibilities, but other solutions – fanciful feathered friends, pensive pachyderms, oracular under tens and savvy savants are to be avoided at all costs – rather be shot for seriousness than desertion, though a slide into mawkishness is at times inevitable

take today for instance – I have been fighting viruses, marshalling antibodies, I have been stamping my feet so hard on the floor it has fallen away and I am left suspended, **a lift stuck between two floors** ⁸⁴

here is a time of terror, 'a moment of reprieve'⁸⁵ when all is possible, because there is everything to lose – immediately my life's work surges forward to fill the gap – my life's work! – a substance of infinite morph, which can

⁸³ *Woman In The Dunes* (1964), film based on the novel by Kobo Abe, adapted by himself for the director Hiroshi Teshigahara.

⁸⁴ *Vertigo* (2004), short prose.

⁸⁵ Levi, P. (1988) *Moments Of Reprieve*, Harmondsworth, Abacus, Penguin Books Ltd.

mould to fit any exigency – a lift shaft can be packed with its rubble, a single hole stoppered with a plug of exactly the right durability and dimension, fissures are filled with a quick hardening, levelling solution and even as I trowel this into the cracks, I muse on my alternatives – a life of crime and dissipation, sexual promiscuity, nomadism – lives which in ordinary circumstances have infinite appeal, but today, as I free float in zero gravity, I panic and snatch at floating pens instead and feel grateful for the plastic note pad strung around my neck which tangles with the pearls and is alternately hitting me on the nose and chin

I seize it as a drowning woman seizes a proffered branch and

begin

to

write

What is it you wish to speak of?

Qu'est-ce que je voulais dire?

'What is it you wish to speak of?' is the title of an artistic project⁸⁶ undertaken in parallel with the writing of *The/My Female Voice* and at a time when I was using that terminology as a working title. It constitutes part of an exploratory initial phase of my research. This phase also included the re-reading of a range of writers coming under the description *écriture féminine* and a discursive account of that re-reading forms the subject of the next section.

Qu'est-ce que je voulais dire?

Ah oui – Je voulais dire que la vérité, on ne peu pas la dire.

On peu seulement la transmettre d'un corps à l'autre.

(What did I want to say?

Oh yes – I wanted to say that one cannot say the truth.

One can only transmit it from one body to the other.)

(Cixous, 1986 p71)

Approximately thirty women with whom I was engaged in a relationship of some trust – colleagues, friends and acquaintances – were given a sheet of paper bearing the following request:

**I am collecting material for my research.
This involves asking women to contribute text or speak
in answer to the following question:**

What is it you wish to speak of?

**Please consider the above question for two weeks.
At the end of this period either write your response,
record it onto audiotape, or I can video your response.**

I can be contacted at Dartington College of Arts:

⁸⁶ A full discursive account of this project and its outcomes can be found in Appendix Two.

or at home:
or you can e mail me:

If you wish to post your response to me, my home address is: [...]

Please attach your address to your response, so that I can contact you to
request permission to use your contribution in any form that may
involve public distribution
ie. As part of a publication or digital film screening.

Thank you very much for your contribution.

Barbara Bridger

I was inviting women to 'have a voice' because I was interested in how
such a 'voice' might speak itself. I was trying to offer women an opportunity to
practice the identity of the self in a non-hostile environment (Brossard, 1988).

I was also attempting to test some of the theories or assumptions implicit
in my re-reading of *écriture féminine* against an artistic project. It was an
attempt to situate my research within my writing practice and to operate as a
reflexive⁸⁷ practitioner.

My initial reading had centred around the work of a group of French
writers who, in the content and form of their commentary, open up a series of
debates on women and writing.⁸⁸ I understood these writers to be challenging
the validity of terminology employed in an early proposal framed to describe
the focus of this research. In it I wrote that I was 'investigating the range of
possibilities embodied in the term "the female voice" by reference to my own
writing and other relevant texts, both critical and literary'. The French feminist

⁸⁷ See 'Opening Words' p13-16 and footnotes 1 and 10.

⁸⁸ See 'Revisiting *Écriture Féminine*' p 143-159.

writers called into question my deployment of the words 'female' and 'voice'. This artistic project was formulated as a way of broadening my investigation, by opening it up to the sample of women described above.

Outcomes

This project produced a range of outcomes. Women responded by email, in writing, and significantly more women than I had anticipated, chose to make a video contribution. Presented with this material, I decided to produce two outcomes that could be 'gifted' back to my participants. I edited a selection of the written and emailed responses and compiled them into a small booklet,⁸⁹ which was made available at the public showings of the video⁹⁰. A copy of this booklet was also sent to every participant along with an invitation to the showing and to a later research seminar⁹¹ presenting a discursive account of this part of my research.

The other outcomes are connected to the project's investigative function in relation to my research. I was not looking for definitive answers, but instead an understanding of critical areas of concern and their associated questions. As I have already explained, some of these issues are dealt with in more detail in the section that follows, but it is perhaps useful, as a preliminary, to list some of them here. They include authenticity and the truth of self-hood, desire and the

⁸⁹ Booklet of selected writings, Appendix Two ppxcii.

⁹⁰ The Phoenix, Exeter And Devon Arts Centre, (May 2005), tEXt05 Text Festival, , *Women Writing and Reading, Past Present, Local and Global* – Conference (May 2007), Alberta University, Canada. (20 minute version) see DVD Appendix Two pxciii.

⁹¹ Research Presentation (May, 2005) Dartington College of Arts.

possibility of transgression. The existence and nature of women's writing was also brought into question and alongside it associated issues of private and public speech and formal and informal language. My request that women responding on video speak as well as move, also released a set of enquiries into the relationship between language, the body and representation.

As I processed the donated thoughts, observations and challenges, I was party to a range of perspectives and understandings owned and revealed by the women who participated. Whilst I did not consider them to be in any way representative of a gendered position, these responses could be usefully considered in the light of my reading on gender. This process fleshed out the theory, locating it in the context of the lives of these individual women. The fact that they were friends and acquaintances only added to this personalising process, giving the material a significance of place and consequence. I understood, or perhaps it is more correct to say I *knew* it better.

Revisiting Écriture Féminine

Re-reading

In this section I am going to revisit, in the spirit of autobiography and critique, some of the theoretical and polemical writing of the 1970s to which the term *écriture féminine* became attached. The autobiographical motive is that this work contributed significantly to the shaping of my aspirations as both writer and feminist. The critical motive is that I want to re-examine its continuing pertinence for my writing, and in doing so to take up the kind of distance that critical examination requires.

Re-reading as an activity has some autobiographical precedence; I was twenty-three when *The Female Eunuch* (1970) was first published and my mother-in-law, who worked in a university bookshop, gave me a copy as soon as it arrived in her stock. At about the same time I read *The Feminine Mystique* by Betty Friedan (1972). I still have my original Penguin copy with Boticelli's Venus rising out of a shell full of domestic objects and my annotations in the chapters, 'Progressive Dehumanization' and 'The Forfeited Self'. In the early seventies I also read *The Second Sex* by Simone de Beauvoir ((1949)1972) and later in the seventies, when I joined a women's group, I found several texts were being circulated amongst its membership. They included *The Hite Report* (1976) *Kin flicks* (1978) by Lisa Alther and *The Women's Room* (1977) by Marilyn French.

Throughout this period, I also regularly read *Wires* and *Spare Rib*. In their fifteenth anniversary issue *Spare Rib* edited a short article I had written and published it on their letters page:

BIRTHDAY GREETINGS

Dear *Spare Rib*,

On its fifteenth birthday is *Spare Rib* into nostalgia? If so it can count on me. I ruined my first teeth on National Health orange juice and I can clearly remember the birth of *Spare Rib* and just how welcome its overdue arrival was. At fifteen I had observed the powerlessness of most women and had starved myself to prove I had some. 'The Female Eunuch' affirmed and confirmed so much I had long felt isolated in. Not least of all by showing me that a woman could write with such pace and wit whilst expressing such challenging concerns:- 'If you think you are emancipated, you might consider the idea of tasting your menstrual blood – if it makes you sick, you've got a long way to go baby.' I measured myself for years against this yardstick and found myself lacking.

In the subsequent years women's groups and the monthly issue of *Spare Rib* helped to provide what I and Betty Friedan knew housework could not. How can I adequately describe the exhilaration of that time? Of meetings packed to the walls with eager women. Of massive rallies in support of women's right to abortion. The unity inspired by the fight against facism and the emergence of Women's Aid. For a woman with the flush of the sixties barely faded on her cheeks, this was heady stuff.

So I read Fay Weldon and ironised on my past, Doris Lessing and didn't understand. I read Simone de Beauvoir and found it hard to sympathise with the plight of 'us French intellectuals' so I read Erica Jong and the Hite Report and was 'glad to be gay' instead.

We read and read and read and passed *Spare Rib* around the women's group along with 'Wires' until the hard, left-wing politico's clashed with the soft, buckwheat eating, womb-worshippers over the ideology behind the new Women's Centre. They clashed and smashed the group and I stood bewildered and lost amongst its ruins.

And now I, like many women of my age it seems, don't join but write at home, unable to decide whether this is a retreat or true maturity at last. And I find myself getting out the old stuff again: rereading 'Half the Sky', Juliet Mitchell and Kate Millet and wondering at the change in Germaine. Nostalgia? No, I don't think so because I've also gone back to reading *Spare Rib*.

Despite or because of its new, glossy format? Who knows, except that now I want to contribute. There should be no 'old issues' for

feminists, just more subtle and dangerous mutations of the same. We had a good grounding, let us not forget it. Let us restate it, for our own sakes and for the sake of every new reader of *Spare Rib*.

(Issue No. 180 July 1987)

At the time I was annoyed by the relegation of my 'article' to the letters page and the effect of the harsh editing on my grammar. Now I am rather embarrassed by my attempts at 'punchy journalism'. I find it hard to recognise myself in the tone of the piece. However, I note that, even at this stage (I was forty), I mention re-reading. Here is previous evidence of my current strategies and preoccupations, including a wish to measure myself against the ideas and development of influential writers.

Later again, whilst working on research in the sociology department at Keele University⁹², I became interested in the work of Elaine Showalter, particularly *A Literature of Their Own* and *The Female Malady*. I have continued to read Showalter and have just completed a re-reading of *The Female Malady* and am revisiting her 1997 text *Hystories* on hysterical epidemics.

As their work was published, I began to concentrate more on emerging British writers and academics, for instance Eva Figes, Kate Millet, Elaine Feinstein, Sheila Rowbottom and Ann Oakley. On completion of my sociological research, I felt able to broaden my reading and in the early eighties I read *Psychoanalysis and Feminism* by Juliet Mitchell. First published in 1975, this seminal text provided the bridge I needed into *écriture féminine*.

⁹² Description of this work 'The/My Female Voice' pp32-36.

I place this commentary on my re-reading of *écriture féminine* here, at the centre of my thesis, to reflect its position in the progress of my research. This section was written after *The/My Female Voice*, 'What is it you wish to speak of?' and *driving home* and at the same time as 'The True Aerialist'. The overall introduction to 'Autobiographical Writings' and the section 'Tracings' were written after 'Revisiting *Écriture Féminine*'.

The ideas explored in this section are also central in other respects. Although I am aware of the continuing modification of many of *écriture féminine*'s early proposals and practices, I am also aware that the concepts they pioneered have a significant foundational role not only in terms of a continuing history of the relationship between women and writing, but also in terms of my own personal writing history. When they emerged, some of the concepts constituted significant advances in thinking and I use this re-reading of *écriture féminine* to support my revisiting of work written contemporaneously. I also use it to support the commentaries on writing completed much more recently, during the course of my doctoral studies. In this way I demonstrate its continuing influence on my practice. *Écriture féminine* is placed at the centre of this research to reflect the fact that it is still central to my writing practice. It underpins my investigation of my practice and in this way, it supports my developing investigation of the definition, nature and operation of a female voice.

However, it would be wrong to suggest that pursuing this reflexive and supportive relationship has been a simple or smooth process. As I suggest in my introduction, it has also taken time to arrive at a productive understanding of some ideas falling under the general umbrella of *écriture féminine*. In the past I have often felt uneasy about exactly how they related to my practice. It has not always been an unproblematic assimilation. My understanding of the notion of 'writing from the body', for instance, remained partial for some time. I found it perplexing and still have some resistance to certain aspects of the concept. However, I have, from my first encounter with *écriture féminine*, used my writing to further my understanding, using that process of 'writing through' to which I have already referred.

This section is, in this respect, just a continuation of that process. It is not an attempt to give a comprehensive account of the work of the theorists mentioned here. It is in no respects a definitive process. It is, instead, a reassessment of those aspects of their past thinking that continue to influence my current thinking and practice.

Revisiting

Moreover, as soon as the author/writer becomes essentially a psychological entity, the logic of identity comes to dominate every interpretation, and every analysis. (Lechte, 1990 p108)

I make claims throughout this research for a reflexive relationship between my writing and those theorists who take writing as the central focus for a discussion of women's identity.⁹³ Julia Kristeva has been influential in this respect and so I have chosen to give attention, in the first part of this section, to her theories on language and identity. I then pursue my investigation through a reading of Luce Irigaray and Hélène Cixous, arriving at an expanded notion of identity that embraces those theories implied in the phrase 'writing from the body'.

Having discussed the approaches to language and the subject instigated by these three formative theorists, I will then, in *Part Two*, undertake a more wide ranging examination of the characteristics of women's writing. I do this in order to arrive at a personal relationship with these concepts and definitions. By personal relationship, I mean one that informs my own practice, one that provides a way of validating my writing, or suggests ways in which it might develop

⁹³ My use of the terms 'subject' and 'identity' draw on interpretations that emerge out of a feminist psychoanalytic reading. Women becoming subjects are avoiding the invisibility implicit in being the object, the representation. Invisibility is lost as the woman subject dispenses with the representational economy of same and other in a bid for intersubjectivity. Women search for representational economies that recognise their subjectivity in order to construct identity differently. See my discussion of Kristeva pp124-125 on the enunciating subject.

Part One

In the mid-nineteen seventies, Kristeva draws ⁹⁴ our attention to the fact that social experience, as defined by feminist politics, results from a psychoanalytic approach to the question of sexual difference. She considers the subject to be a product of language and is concerned with those processes through which the subject is drawn into the discursive ⁹⁵ domain. To this end, her writing becomes increasingly concerned with theories of the subject in language linked to signifying processes. She borrows from Freud in order to 'give the advances of dialectical logic a materialist foundation – a theory of signification based on the subject, his formation, and his corporeal linguistic and social dialectic' (Kristeva (1974) 1984 p15).

Kristeva also looks to Lacan for her position on social difference. If it is accepted that male and female are not essential categories and that anatomy alone does not determine sexual identity, sexual difference cannot be reduced to the biological. If we also take the position that it cannot be viewed as merely a historical, cultural construct then it follows that we have to look elsewhere for the production of sexual difference. Lacan uses the term 'sexuation' (Lacan (1972-1973) 1998 p64-89) to describe a process of achieving a place in the social as a sexed subject. Lacan is concerned with how speaking beings experience sexuality at the level of the psyche. He describes all speaking subjects as

⁹⁴ I am following the convention of referring to the texts of all cited authors in the present tense, even though the part that this writing played in my own past, and in a continuing discourse to which it now provides an earlier chapter, does occasionally trouble this usage.

⁹⁵ I draw on Michel Foucault's use of the word 'discourse' here. A discursive use of language being socially and historically placed and operating with a shared vocabulary, denoting a shared set of assumptions, values and concerns.

experiencing castration, it being the sacrifice demanded by the symbolic and applying to both sexes: man wanting to **have** the phallus, woman wanting to **be** it and both being limited by language in their bodily search for satisfaction.

'Waiving the phallus, rather than waving it, is the fate of man and woman alike' (Adams, 1992 p78-83). In this way the subject is 'barred' i.e. split between the symbolic identity and the body that sustains it and is alienated by its entrance into a language system, which both conjoins and divides.

In her text on Lacan and post feminism, Elizabeth Wright describes the subject as being divided between fixed identifications and actual being – between 'moi' and 'je', alienation and a structural condition of subjectivity. (Wright, 2000 p18-23) She outlines the way in which, according to Lacan, this splitting produces a sexual division and bestows symbolic gender, drawing attention to the fact that woman is not completely identified with the phallic function but operates choice, saying yes **and** no, yes **or** no to it. Wright identifies this element of choice as the crucial reason for the 'undecideability' (Wright, 2000 p29) of woman and therefore the impossibility of totalising woman – the reason why femininity is not organised as a universal function.

Woman is not totally within the symbolic and has a supplementary and different jouissance⁹⁶ to her male counterpart whose surplus jouissance remains trapped by the object and looks for the realisation of its fantasy in woman. (Lacan (1972-1973) 1998 p65)

Kristeva acknowledges this de-stabilisation of the notion of a fixed and whole feminine subject. However, she is committed to a position, which posits

⁹⁶ For a fuller definition of 'jouissance' see later in this section and footnote 48.

language and in particular 'the symbolic' as a pre-condition for social life. This being the case, she deduces that it is impossible to have a 'feminine' that can operate entirely independently of the masculine symbolic, but rather looks for a pre-oedipal space where bodily pulsations, as not yet formulated into an ordered system of drives, act intermittently to disrupt symbolic discourse.

Kristeva is attempting to identify a signifying practice, which 'although produced in language, is only intelligible *through* it', claiming that 'linguistic changes constitute changes in the status of the subject, his relation to the body, to others and to objects' (Kristeva (1974) 1984 p15). In her writings of this period, Kristeva is looking for linguistic processes that exceed the subject and her/his structures of communication. She is searching for poetic forms, which, in their 'transformation of natural and social resistances, limitations and stagnations', enter into linguistic code and social communication and become a practice. This practice she describes as having its equivalents in political revolution and as being introduced into society through changes effected in the subject. In Kristeva's terms,

What we call *signifiance*, then is precisely this unlimited and unbounded generating process, this unceasing operation of the drives toward, in, and through language, toward, in and through the exchange system and its protagonists – the subject and his institutions.

(Kristeva (1974) 1984 p17)

Kristeva also tells us that, only if this practice succeeds in challenging the boundaries of the subject and society, can it be considered as operating as 'jouissance' and revolution.

Here Kristeva intersects with Cixous and other feminist writers who adopt the term 'écriture'. They are using Barthes' terminology and acknowledge his theories. In particular they refer to his claim that 'écriture' is a transparent instrument, whereas 'écriture' is opaque and disturbs our understanding of the possibilities of writing and art' (Barthes, 1980 p42).

For thinkers and writers in France, Barthes, Derrida, Kristeva and Sollers – the point is to go beyond 'écriture' and towards the analysis or production of writing as opaque. These writers define writing as experience rather than instrument and as such an activity that engenders this *jouissance*, often described as an 'experience of limits'.

(Philippe Sollers, in Lechte, 1990 p24)

Kristeva identifies two modalities in the signifying process. These are the semiotic⁹⁷ and the symbolic and she suggests that the necessary dialectic between the two constitutes both language and the subject. In this attempt to demonstrate that language produces not only meanings, but also psychological subjects, Kristeva describes the semiotic as a pre-signifying energy, containing those aspects of the signifying process concerned with the energy charges and psychical marks characteristic of 'the chora'. Kristeva characterises this chora as 'a non-expressive totality formed by the drives and their stases in a motility that is as full of movement as it is regulated'. The chora is essentially non-representational, not a sign or a signifier, but rather the necessary precursor to any position of signification. Temporary, repetitive and discontinuous,

⁹⁷ Elizabeth Grosz (1989 p42) gives a useful description of Kristeva's use of this term: 'Kristeva uses the term 'the semiotic' idiosyncratically. It has resonances with Saussure's revitalisation of the term, which is derived from the Greek term *semeion*, 'sign'. In her usage it designates the contributions of sexual drives to signification. It must be opposed to the symbolic, understood in Lacan's sense as the law-abiding operations of socio-linguistic systems. All signifying practices and all social subjects are the effects of the interrelation of these terms'.

Kristeva concisely describes it as, 'a modality of *signifiance* in which the linguistic sign is not yet articulated as the absence of an object and as the distinction between real and symbolic' (Kristeva (1974) 1984 p26).

Kristeva also claims that the chora is ordered by a symbolic of social organisation that is mediated through the mother. The mother not only takes the place of alterity, becoming the phallus, but also allows the thetic unity of signifier and signified to be disrupted. In order to argue this position, Kristeva introduces the term 'semiotic chora', to describe a system capable of returning desire and the return of *jouissance* to an autoerotic body. The semiotic chora is again described as disrupting the signifying order and this again has an impact not only on the subject but also on language. Recognition of the resulting *jouissance*, either in the music of a text or the decentring of the subject, forms what Kristeva calls the 'genitality' of poetic language⁹⁸ (Lechte, 1990 p152).

Poetic language is usefully described in the following way by Cavallaro:

The type of language that overtly subverts mainstream conventions is 'poetic language' a discourse that refuses to reduce the available systems of signs to a communicational vehicle by suspending the rules of logic, truth, consciousness and identity, and where meaning is never localizable to the extent that it is nowhere and everywhere at once. (Cavallaro, 2003 p 80-81)

For Kristeva the possibility of meaning is contained in poetic language's use of syntax and grammar. She describes the poetic word as polyvalent and multidetermined, adhering to a logic exceeding that of codified discourse and fully coming into being only in the margins of recognised culture (Kristeva

⁹⁸ Expanded on later in 'Part 2' p153.

trans. Gora, Jardine, and Roudiez, 1984). Poetic language can, therefore, in Kristeva's terms, attack, 'not only denotation (the positing of the object) but meaning (the positing of the enunciating subject) as well' (Kristeva (1974) 1984 p58).

It is in this last quotation that we are given some indication of the importance of Kristeva's thinking in relation to the writing subject and by association the female writing subject. For her, feminine language is not, in any literal sense, that language which is used exclusively by women. It is, rather, language that disrupts the rigid rules of the symbolic and by implication the patriarchal. Kristeva shifts attention from the gender of the author to the gender of the text when she introduces those semiotic drives, which undercut and transgress thetic unicity, which insist on denotative re-positioning and allow for a plurality of subject, approach and meaning. Within her definition of poetic language, Kristeva describes a 'poetic text' where the semiotic dismantles the symbolic and moves the thetic towards the semiotic chora, giving opportunity for such multiplicity of meaning.

Kristeva's use of the term 'intertextuality'⁹⁹ to describe 'both texts and human subjects as points of intersection of multiple voices, as multi-layered and plural identity' (Cavallaro, 2003 p80) has been very influential on my thinking and therefore on my writing, as has Bakhtin's definition of 'heteroglossia', a

⁹⁹ Kristeva uses the term 'intertextuality' to replace Mikhail Bakhtin's term 'dialogism'. The meanings are similar in that they refer to the dialogue between two (or several) 'texts' or systems of meaning. This interaction takes place within a single, discrete text or utterance. Intertextuality can refer to the conscious, intended meaning of the author and to a range of unconscious meanings, which can be released (for example) through previous use of the 'texts'.

system that allows the different voices of the self.¹⁰⁰ His description of the possibilities of a 'polyphonic' approach, one which acknowledges the different voices of a multiple self and Kristeva's identification of the pre-linguistic space of the rhythms and sounds of bodily experience, were invaluable to my developing definition of a writing 'subject/self-in-process'. However, I was aware of those who criticised Kristeva for her continuing dependence on the symbolic and I knew that Irigaray and Cixous were among those critics.

If Kristeva's approach is characterised by a challenge to the symbolic, theirs is a search for an approach to the female speaking and writing subject, which does not emerge out of an existing masculine model. They describe this writing in texts that are demonstrably independent of the phallic. This writing and these ideas were of interest to me because they appeared to offer some solution to my ambivalent response to Rochefort's comment claiming that a man's book is a book, whereas a woman's book is a woman's book.¹⁰¹

In a review of Irigaray's writings, Margaret Whitford describes Irigaray's work as being above all concerned to work out 'the conditions of women's subjectivity – how women can assume the 'I' of discourse in their own right and not as a derivative male 'I' (Whitford, 1991 p42). These concerns have direct relevance to my wish to write as a woman, but not be perceived as writing a woman's book or script.¹⁰² In their search for an independent mode of writing,

¹⁰⁰ See description of *America! America!* pp55-58 and full text in Appendix One pp xvi-xxii.

¹⁰¹ See 'Autobiographical Writings' pp31-32.

¹⁰² See discussion in 'Autobiographical Writings' pp31-32.

I recognised that Cixous and Irigaray were not only acknowledging my dilemma, but also suggesting writerly solutions.

I will now go on to discuss those aspects of Irigaray's theories that I perceive as being particularly relevant to my practice. This will include a continued examination of the subject and language through a review of two selected chapters. I will look at *Women's Discourse and Men's Discourse* in *Je, Tu, Nous* (Irigaray, 1993) and a chapter on the appropriation of the subject by the masculine in *Speculum of the Other Woman* (Irigaray, 1985).

Irigaray is concerned with phallogentric¹⁰³ culture's marginalization of woman in body and concept: with the construction of woman as other. She defines a hom(m)osexual culture in which men exchange goods and women and she poses a hysteric definition of women that acknowledges the fact that this hom(m)osexual culture gives women no place as subjects in the symbolic. According to Irigaray, because women occupy the object position this means that in 'phantasy' they are the mother and in language they are the predicate¹⁰⁴. She is working to a Freudian model that would suggest an equivalent between playing with the body of the mother and manipulating the corpus of language. Freud constructs a concept of men's relationship with the 'phantasized' mother, which is exemplified by the 'fort-da', the manipulable object that can be thrown

¹⁰³ Irigaray (along with many of the French Feminists) adopts the term 'phallogentric' to describe the use of the universal male as norm and the consequent erasure of the presence of the feminine. Phallogentricism is often associated with 'logocentricism' in texts: the existence of a presence outside the words themselves, either individual i.e. 'the author', or a universal, 'God' which guarantees 'meaning' or 'truth'.

¹⁰⁴ This can also be described as women being 'spoken of'. For more discussion see section 'Speak' in 'What is it you wish to speak of?' Appendix Two pp xliii-iii.

away and then retrieved (Freud (1920). Irigaray refers to these theories in *The Gesture in Psychoanalysis* (Irigaray 1989 p103-118). In this text she explains how such a relationship allows men to relate to the phantasized mother as to an object. She adds that, 'as the mother is a different sex, they can do this without putting their own subject position into question'. She suggests that if women develop their identity in the same way, the necessary reduction of the mother to an object, will inevitably result in a reduction of themselves to an object. If a woman identifies with her mother, then she will inevitably identify with this objectification. 'The woman cannot reduce her mother to an object without reducing herself to an object at the same time, because they are of the same sex' (Irigaray, 1989 p210).

Using language only confirms and complicates this situation, presenting a woman with 'the choice between remaining outside the signifying system altogether (in order to stay with her mother) or entering a patriarchal genealogy in which her position as object is already given' (Whitford, 1991 p45-46). This dilemma relates to earlier comments I make in 'Opening Words', where I acknowledge my reluctance to identify myself as a 'writer'.¹⁰⁵ It leads me to consider whether I can view my reluctance as an intuitive wish not to admit to my identification with a signifying system associated with the patriarchal: to ask whether my reluctance is a resistance to the denial of my female subjective status, required by this action? If it is, there is some evidence that, as a woman, I am not entirely alone in my resistance, in my difficulty with the ontological

¹⁰⁵ 'Opening Words' p7.

difference between being someone who writes and being 'a writer'. Elaine Showalter refers to three phases of women's writing. The first she names 'Feminine', it existed prior to 1880 and was characterised by women writers imitating the dominant male models, typically by adopting male names like George Eliot or emphasizing their marital status, for example Mrs. Gaskell. The second from 1880 to 1920 she calls 'Feminist' and describes these writers as striving for more autonomy. In the last phase 'Female' women are freed from a reaction to the patriarchal and search instead for a satisfactory female writing identity (Showalter (1977) 1982).

Irigaray provides some solutions to the problems contained in these dilemmas, when she suggests that things can work differently. She describes the possibility that, 'A woman would be directly in intersubjective relation with her mother. Her economy is that of the 'between-subjects', and not that of the subject-object relation'. Irigaray wants it to be possible for a woman to be able to enter language as a subject and to make a female identification with her mother that does not objectify her.

It is necessary for a woman to be able to speak her identity (*se dire*) in words, in images and in symbols within this intersubjective relation with her mother, then with other women, in order to enter into a relation with men that is not destructive. (Irigaray, 1987a, p211)

When Irigaray suggests that women can avoid being predicates in a cultural grammar, she is not suggesting that women entering language will signal the end of the process of signification, nor is she suggesting a female syntax that rests entirely within the structuring of a sentence. She is rather

suggesting that they can enunciate a desire¹⁰⁶ 'which is not yet qualified [...]not yet frozen by a predicate' (Irigaray, 1984 p79). Irigaray defines women 'being in the féminine' (Irigaray, 1984 p132) in terms of 'becoming' (divine) and suggests that women pursue a speaking and writing strategy where the dynamics of enunciation are given primacy over language, which she describes as simply concerned with conveying information or truth. Margaret Whitford sums up her position:

the blood and flesh of the phantasized mother/woman, which sustains the language/house of men, must find its own symbolic expression in language, thus becoming the other pole of cultural discourse, and allowing two-way predication, (the 'double syntax'), (Irigaray, 1985) unfreezing the discourse which has petrified, and at the same time giving to women the cultural and symbolic possibilities previously allowed only to men in patriarchy, including the possibility of divinity. (Whitford, 1995 p48)

Irigaray does, however, identify a problem for feminists in any attempt they may make to move from the possibilities of this enunciation to the possibilities of epistemology. She does this by drawing our attention to the fact that a male subject of enunciation is hidden in third person statements. The male subject – *he/it* is a transposition of *I*, *he/it* also becomes *there is* – again a version of *I*.¹⁰⁷ She describes feminism as searching for a way of making the female subject an epistemological subject, 'to become *Is (des "je")* producing truth: cultural, political and religious' (Irigaray, 1984 p130).

¹⁰⁶ Irigaray's use of 'desire' makes clear reference to Lacan's use of terminology, his writings on the loss or lack of the maternal body, a situation required by a person's entry into cultural order. Such a loss or lack (according to Lacan) produces an unconscious desire, which can never be satisfied. This is as opposed to want or need, which refer to demandable objects. Desire is therefore that which cannot be named, originating in a loss prior to language. See expanded discussion of this in section 'Wish' Appendix Two pp xliii-liv.

¹⁰⁷ I give more detail on these aspects of French syntax on pp 132-133.

Again this reflects a resistance that I have observed in myself: I am reluctant to identify myself as a 'female writer'. When Irigaray highlights these systemic difficulties embedded in the language, she raises concerns, which I illustrate in the section 'What is it you wish to speak of?'¹⁰⁸. I acknowledge that these 'hidden' factors, as described by Irigaray, have an impact on the 'value' of women's writing and speaking. They can promote a view of women's writing that suggests it is predominantly engaged with certain subjects. Writing on the question of whether women are more firmly grounded than men in the world of immanence, Naomi Schor writes:

There exists no reliable body of evidence to show that women's art is either more or less particularistic than man's – has a higher density of homey/and or ornamental details than those produced by male counterparts [...] Feminine specificity lies in the direction of a specifically feminine form of idealism, one that seeks to transcend not the sticky feminine world of prosaic detail, but rather the deadly asperities of male violence and destruction. (Schor, 1987 p97)

In the past I have had particular resistance to the notion that women's writing is largely concerned with the personal, believing that this disallowed certain authorial possibilities. I linked this 'personal' classification to difficulties I had with considering myself a valid epistemological subject. I, therefore, perceived any identification with the domestic and personal as a form of restriction. I managed to maintain this perception despite the evidence of my own writing; despite plays like *Material Evidence*¹⁰⁹ and the domestic context for

¹⁰⁸ See more on value of women's speech in 'Responses to the Question', Appendix Two pp lxxvi-lxxxix.

¹⁰⁹ 'The/My Female Voice', pp43-48.

war established in *A Looped Footage*.¹¹⁰ This sense of constraint had links with those ideological differences I had seen existing amongst my fellow feminists many years ago. Groups of women often divided themselves into those concerned with the personal and those dedicated to the political. Observing these choices, I had preferred, in the past, to identify myself as a socialist feminist.¹¹¹ I thought this was my only way of moving from enunciation to epistemology. However, I later understood that this was a simplistic analysis, producing an unsustainable position. It was an incomplete understanding inevitably superseded by more developed and sophisticated reasoning. This shift in my perception occurred as a direct result of my reading of Irigaray, Kristeva and Cixous. Their definition of 'écriture' as opposed to 'écriture' provided a more useful and sustainable way of becoming a successful epistemological subject, of being able to speak not *like* a woman but *as* a woman. Margaret Whitford is again useful here, defining this position by saying, 'Here the distinction between 'speaking like a woman and speaking as a woman is vital, since to speak as a woman implies not simply psychosexual positioning, but also social positioning' (Whitford, 1995 p49).

I also understand this distinction as having some influence on my chosen methodology in this research, in my understanding of writing as an autobiographical process of achieving both identity and understanding. I often describe this process as 'writing through' to suggest a methodology less

¹¹⁰ Full version of this text pp67-82

¹¹¹ See footnote 47.

concerned with representing knowledge and more concerned with producing it. In similar contexts, Irigaray uses the phrase 'parler-femme' which puns on 'par les femmes' to mean both feminine language and language **produced**¹¹² by women. (In English this is represented by "speaking (as) women".) Whitford proposes that

speaking of woman should be language (langage) or discourse which contributes to making it possible for women to occupy the social and symbolic space as women-subjects, epistemological subjects, producers of truth and culture. (Whitford, 1995 p51)

I find some support for my use of the word 'produce' here and for those methods I have employed in my struggle to become an epistemological subject.

Having provided a general description of Irigaray's position in relation to the subject and language, I will now go on to look in more detail at her section in *je,tu,nous* on *Women's Discourse and Men's Discourse*.

...how could discourse not be sexed when language is?
(Irigaray, 1993 p32)

This chapter has been of interest in my search for a positive definition of a gendered voice. Irigaray not only urges us to 'change the laws of language that relate to gender' (Irigaray, 1993 p33), but she is also willing to make some definitive statements about what might constitute a gendered voice. She begins by considering whether it might be influenced by society or language and states:

I think this division should be denied. Language is a product of the sedimentations of languages of former eras. It conveys their methods of social communication. It's neither universal, nor neutral, nor

¹¹² My bold.

intangible. There are no universal linguistic structures in the brain of the speaking subject; rather, every era has its specific needs, creates its own ideals, and imposes them as such. (Irigaray, 1993 p30)

Irigaray maintains that society and language are co-dependent and she gives as example the masculine in French syntax: a mark, which she claims 'erases the feminine' and 'has an impact on the way subjectivity is experienced and the way it is expressed in and by discourse'. She points out that the neuter or impersonal is expressed by the same pronoun, or in the same form as the masculine: eg. 'Il faut' and by consequence, and referring to Greek and Latin, she declares the origin of necessity as 'not neutral'.

In French language, according to Irigaray, 'anything believed to have value belongs to men and is marked by their gender'. In contrast the feminine is reserved for those nouns of less value, for those objects less crucial to life.

In her research she has found that women sexualise their discourse, addressing 'sexed interlocutors', whereas men 'remain among themselves, between *they (its)*, or between *I -he/they (je-il(s))*, which is equivalent to making a non-conscious sexual choice'. Irigaray does not wish women to de-sexualise their discourse, rather she is anxious that they should, 'situate themselves as *I, I-she/they (je-elle(s))*, to represent themselves as subjects and talk to other women' (Irigaray, 1993 pp30-33).

Men's discourse is, in her terms, inextricably tied to the 'individual and collective history of the masculine subject' (Irigaray, 1993 p35) and therefore of 'more secondary nature, cut off from its corporeal roots, its cosmic environment,

its relation to life'. Women on the other hand 'maintain a relationship to this real environment but they don't subjectivize it as their own' (Irigaray, 1993 p325).

A section of Irigaray's, *Speculum of the Other Woman* further investigates these differences between the male and female subject. It starts with an unequivocal statement: 'Any theory of the "subject" has always been appropriated by the "masculine"'. She goes on to give some advice to any woman writer:

Turn everything upside down, inside out back to front. *Rack it with radical convulsions*, carry back, re-import, those crises that her "body" suffers in her impotence to say what disturbs her. Insist also and deliberately upon those blanks in discourse which recall the places of her exclusion and which, by their *silent plasticity*, ensure the cohesion, the articulation, the coherent expansion of established forms. Re-inscribe them hither and thither *as divergencies*, otherwise and elsewhere than they are expected, in *ellipses* and *eclipses* that deconstruct the logical grid of the reader-writer, drive him out of his mind, trouble his vision to the point of incurable diplopia at least. *Overthrow syntax* by suspending its eternally teleological order, by snipping the wires, cutting the current, breaking the circuits, switching the connections, by modifying continuity, alternation, frequency, intensity. Make it impossible for a while to predict whence, whither, when, how, why.... something goes by or goes on; will come, will spread, will reverse, will cease moving. Not by means of a growing complexity of the same of course, but by the irruption of other circuits, by the intervention at times of short circuits that will disperse, diffract, deflect endlessly, making energy explode sometimes with no possibility of returning to one single origin. A force that can no longer be channelled according to a given *plan/e*: a projection from a single source, even in the secondary circuits, with retroactive effects. (Irigaray, 1985 p142)

This reads like a manifesto and amongst these suggestions, as to how women's discourse can operate more effectively, Irigaray refers to preoccupations that she holds in common with Kristeva and Cixous. In the

description of irrupted circuits we can hear echoes of Kristeva's pre-oedipal bodily pulsations and there is also a return to Kristeva's description of a feminine, poetic language which is less concerned with content and themes than with posing a challenge to conventional syntax, logic and orthodox structures. The suffering, impotent body further reminds us of Cixous' encouragement to women to let their bodies be heard.

Irigaray wants women to speak 'only in riddles, allusions, hints, parables...'. And she demonstrates this technique when she speaks of breaking modes of specula(riza)tion, of a mirrored specular surface, of a 'speculum used to enter, to look with 'speculative intent' tracking down what there is to be seen of female sexuality' (Irigaray, 1985 p142-145).

Irigaray describes women's sexuality as having direct bearing on their use of language. 'Woman has sex organs just about everywhere' (Irigaray, in Conboy, 1997 p252). She suggests that this multiplicity of female sexuality results in a pluralized feminine language.

In 'Stabat Mater' Kristeva also makes a link between loving, writing and the body,

What is love, for a woman, the same thing as writing. Laugh. Impossible. Flash on the unnameable, weavings of abstractions to be torn. Let a body venture at last out of its shelter, take a chance with meaning under a veil of words. (Kristeva, J. (1977)1983, trans. Goldhammer and Suleiman (Eds.) 1986 p100)

The body does indeed at last come out of its shelter in this part of my investigation, as I look more closely at notions of what Cixous refers to as

'writing from the body' in order to further investigate the relationship between women's discourse and their embodied sexuality: a relationship central to the project of *écriture féminine*'.

Returning firstly to Irigaray, I find a detailed description of her beliefs about the way women's sexuality differs from men's.

Woman's auto-eroticism is very different from a man's [...] she touches herself in and out of herself without any need for mediation, and before there is any way to distinguish activity from passivity. Woman "touches" herself all the time and moreover no one can forbid her to do so, for her genitals are formed of two lips in continuous contact. Thus, within herself, she is already two – but not divisible into one(s) – that caress each other. (Irigaray, 1985 p24)

In this way Irigaray contrasts a general, masculine perception of women's bodies with individual women's experience of their bodies, assuring us that women's sexuality is 'always at least double' and adding that she can go further and become 'plural'. Irigaray then goes on to expand these theories into definitions of women's language:

Hers are contradictory words, somewhat mad from the standpoint of reason, inaudible for whoever listens to them with ready-made grids, with a fully elaborated code in hand. For in what she says, too, at least when she dares, woman is constantly touching herself. She steps ever so slightly aside from herself with a murmur, an exclamation, a whisper, a sentence left unfinished.... When she returns, it is to set off again from elsewhere. From another point of pleasure, or of pain. One would have to listen with another ear; as if hearing an "other meaning" always in the process of weaving itself, of embracing itself with words, but also of getting rid of words in order not to become, fixed, congealed in them. For if "she" says something, it is not, it is already no longer, identical with what she means. What she says is never identical with anything, moreover; rather, it is contiguous. *It touches 'upon'*. And when it strays too far from that proximity, she breaks off and starts over at "zero": her body-sex.

(Irigaray in Conboy, 1997 p253)

Cixous writes expressing some agreement with this definition of a feminine language originating from a female body with multiple physical capabilities. But her description of that body has links with Kristeva's identification of maternity as a conceptual challenge to phallogocentrism (Kristeva, 1989). Kristeva claims that gestation and nurture impinge on the boundaries between self and other, subject and object, the internal and the external. Cixous too concentrates on the female body's fertility and she describes feminine writing as a product of this multi-tasking, proliferating body, but she further refines her definition by identifying the processes through which this writing can be produced. In *La Rire de la Méduse*, she suggests that women must 'write through their bodies', claiming that this is a way of inventing 'the impregnable language that will wreck partitions, classes and rhetorics, regulations and codes...' (Cixous (1976) in Marks and Courtivron, p256). Here we can see that although she agrees with Irigaray and Kristeva, in their conviction that such revolution can be achieved through a sweeping away of established syntax, her emphasis is on the change being achieved through a poetic body, a mistress of the signifier. As I have already suggested, she describes this body in similar plural terms to Irigaray, but credits women with an even more infinitized form:

....if there is a "propriety of woman", it is paradoxically her capacity to deappropriate unselfishly, body without end, without appendage, without principle parts Her libido is cosmic just as her consciousness is worldwide. (Cixous (1975) 1976 pp875-893)

Both Irigaray and Cixous regard any position, which defines the feminine in terms of the masculine, as depriving women of meaningful speech. Some argue that this misrepresents Lacan's formula for sexualisation, which, whilst acknowledging a division between the organism and the subject, also recognises the continuity between the bodily and the psychic. But Irigaray and Cixous use this position as a platform to argue for a language of the feminine, for a more independent inscription of the feminine. When Cixous says, 'Who hasn't inscribed with her body the differential, punctured the systems of couple and opposition,' there is an implied criticism of Kristeva's position. And when she says, 'Beware of the signifier that would take you back to the authority of a signified... Break out of the circles: don't remain within the psychoanalytic closure,' that criticism becomes explicit. Cixous emphasises the three-way conversation between women and their bodies and writing and the body when she says, '...women are body. More body hence more writing'. At the same time she attempts to rescue women's corporeality from any negatives associated with its reproductive function, 'Let us dematerpaternalize rather than deny woman, in an effort to avoid the cooptation of procreation'. And tries rather to enter what she describes as 'a thrilling era of the body'.

This 'era of the body' recognises that in Cixous words, 'Oral drive, anal drive, vocal drive – all these drives are our strengths and among them is the gestation drive'. But what particularly characterises *écriture féminine's* approach is made more clear in the second part of Cixous' sentence when she insists on

the link between this valid, fecund body and writing: ' – just like the desire to write; a desire to live self from within, a desire for the swollen belly, for language, for blood' (Cixous (1975)1976 pp875-893).

This approach is put even more succinctly in Cixous' *Three Steps on the Ladder of Writing*. In this text within *Located Under the Bed*, a subsection of her chapter, *The School of Dreams*, Cixous describes how women must write saying, 'One must go on foot, with the body' (Cixous, 1993 p65).

In *The School of Dreams*, Cixous describes writing which draws on the resources of an unconscious, which is in tune with the body's needs and pleasures, which is drawn from and taken back into the body in an action which denies any Lacanian suggestion of lack¹¹³ rather 'asserting plenitude' (Mills in Cameron, 1998 p68) and maternal abundance.

She is giving birth. With the strength of a lioness. Of a plant of a cosmology. Of a woman... A desire for text! Confusion! What possesses her? A child! Paper! Intoxications! I'm overflowing! My breasts overflowing! My breasts overflow! Milk. Ink. The moment of suckling. And I? I too am hungry. The taste of milk, of ink!
(Cixous (1975) 1976 pp 875-893)

For Cixous this link between women's knowledge and writing and the body is a central tenet and one that she repeatedly emphasises. To further illustrate this, I list here some more descriptions of this relationship. All the quotations below are taken from the Cohen and Cohen translation of *Le Rire de la Méduse* and I begin with the most well known, the exhortation to write that opens the essay:

¹¹³ See footnote 106.

Woman must write herself: must write about women and bring women to writing, from which they have been driven away as violently as from their own bodies.

A world of search, the elaboration of a knowledge on the basis of a systematic experimentation with the bodily functions, a passionate and precise interrogation of her erotogeneity.

Writing is for you and you are for you; your body is yours, take it.

By writing herself, woman will return to the body which has been more than confiscated from her, which has been turned into the uncanny stranger on display.... Censor the body and you censor breath and speech at the same time.

Write your self, your body must be heard.

Inscribe the breath of the whole woman.

[A woman speaking in public] lays herself bare. In fact, she physically materializes what she's thinking; she signifies it with her body.

She writes in white ink. [milk]

Text: my body – shot through with streams of song.

Women must write through their bodies.

Who hasn't inscribed with her body the differential,

We may think we find in Cixous' description of an 'other' language with its origins in the body and its sexual pleasures, some parallels with Kristeva's description of a polyvalent, multidetermined, marginal poetic word capable of exceeding existing codes and disrupting the symbolic and the patriarchal. But Kristeva is opposed to the notion of *écriture féminine* and there are dangers associated with discourses that place such emphasis on the body.

Identifying women with their bodies is perilously close to those reactionary arguments in socio-biology and other disciplines, as well as in conservative common sense, which justify women's oppression in terms of the biology – size, hormones, lack of strength, child-bearing functions, lactation, monthly cycles, and so on. (Wolff, 1990 p132)

There is always, in order to avoid the charge of essentialism¹¹⁴, a need to reaffirm the fact that biology can never be regarded as unaffected by culture.

A need to recognise that the way women experience their bodies is always subject to social and political pressures and processes. It is important to avoid any definition of *écriture féminine* which assumes 'an unchanging identity of 'women' and women's bodies, which ignores the realities of historical change, social production, and ideological construction' (Wolff, 1990 p132).

Kristeva would suggest her emphasis on the semiotic avoids these hazards. Locating the possibility of a revolution in language and the subject firmly within the parameters of linguistic difference, within the use of the semiotic in literature, she, like Cixous and Irigaray, 'holds that significant political action can be undertaken in language itself' (Mills in Cameron, 1998 p70).

This is a position of particular significance to my enquiry. It has implications for the notion of a female voice and for my practice. If we characterise female writing as relying on certain modes of linguistic experimentation, if we suggest that these are characterised by an emphasis on an appreciation of the 'unreality' of language, on its lack of transparency, then

¹¹⁴ I refer here to a view that sees certain women's attributes as inherent, distinctive, universal. These qualities being often seen to inevitably derive from their biology, i.e. being biologically determined.

this can be challenged by the observation that these procedures are not specific to women's writing. It can be said that they are part of a more general cultural shift away from established analytical and discursive modes. What I will continue to argue throughout this thesis is that these discourses are particularly significant to women's writing practice, that they contribute to the development of an independent (of the phallic) aesthetic characterised by its detotalised and fragmentary nature, by its enabling use of non-linear syntax, by its adoption of excess, by its concentration on the political/erotic possibilities of language.

Part Two

Part Two argues this significance through a more personal definition of women's writing. In this latter section, I refer to a range of practitioners and use examples of their approach to modify my position.

The fact that the possibility of 'women's voice' in culture has been raised at all is in many ways the culmination of fifteen or more years of feminist work in literary and art criticism. This work has systematically demonstrated the comprehensively patriarchal nature of culture – its institutions and ideologies of production and reception, its regimes of representation, and its formal and textual characteristics.

(Wolff, 1990 p68)

For the woman finds she is irreconcilable things: an outsider by her gender position, by her relation to power; may be an insider by her social position, her class. She can be both. Her ontological, her psychic, her class position all cause doubleness. Doubled consciousness. Doubled understandings. How then could she neglect to invent a form which produces this incessant, critical, splitting motion. To invent this form. To invent the theory for this form.

(DuPlessis, 1990 p8)

Women writers have always tried to steal the language..... When Elaine Marks surveys the *Écriture Féminine* movement in Paris, she observes that in its manifestos of desire "to destroy the male hegemony" over language, "the rage is all the more intense because the writers see themselves as prisoners of the discourse they despise. But is it possible," she asks, "to break out?" Does there exist, as a subterranean current below the surface structure of male-orientated language, a specifically female language, a "mother tongue?"¹¹⁵

(Ostriker (1986) in Retallack in Keller and Miller, 1994 p353)

It seems necessary to begin any discussion of women's writing with reference to Virginia Woolf, who attempts to confirm a category of 'women's writing' through a description of the nature of such writing. In *A Room of One's Own* ((1928) 1983), Woolf summons arguments to support her belief that the

¹¹⁵ See also discussion of 'mother tongue' in 'The True Aerialist' p179.

social situation of women contributes significantly to the work they produce. She uses Elizabeth Barrett Browning as an example, describing how Barrett's years of seclusion led her to concentrate on what was within, rather than on the external circumstances of her life

Whilst arguing for androgyny in a work of art and discouraging women to write from a consciously gendered position, whilst insisting that life should not impinge on art, Woolf paradoxically continues to search for a definition of women's writing. Reviewing a book on women novelists, she identifies subject matter as a point where women's and men's writing can be seen to diverge and become different,

And finally....there rises for consideration the very difficult question of the difference between the man's and the woman's view of any subject. From this spring not only marked differences of plot and incident, but infinite differences in selection, method and style.

(Woolf (1929)1979 p71)

Traces of Woolf's influence can still be seen in the theories of later commentators, for example Elaine Showalter, who describes the primary task of feminist criticism as, 'the identification of the key characteristics of women's writing' (Showalter in Abel, 1982 p14). Showalter forms her own theory of criticism which she terms 'gynocritics', and borrows the phrase 'wild zone' from Edwin Ardner, using it to describe those female experiences unable to find expression or marginalized by a dominant, patriarchal culture. Woolf too claims that women's writing is influenced by its anticipated reception, citing a climate of male disapproval that can cause women's writing to attempt to meet

potential criticism, in effect 'saying this by way of aggression, or that by way of conciliation' (Woolf (1929) 1979 p6).

In *A Room of One's Own*, Woolf takes Jane Austen as an example of a woman who develops a personal approach to language, describing her as rejecting a classic form of the sentence in favour of her own more appropriate and useful version. But she draws back from attributing this difference in the use of language to biological or psychological reasons. Again she prefers to emphasize social context, even as she describes the feminine sentence as 'the psychological sentence of the feminine gender' (Woolf (1928) 1983 p191). She is, in this last quotation, referring to the work of Dorothy Richardson and it is in this review of Richardson's novel *The Tunnel* that we have one of Woolf's most specific and revealing descriptions of women's writing and specifically a woman's sentence.

It is of a more elastic fibre than the old, capable of stretching to the extreme, of suspending the frailest particles, of enveloping the vaguest shapes. Other writers of the opposite sex have used sentences of this description and stretched them to the extreme. But there is a difference. Miss Richardson has fashioned her sentence consciously, in order that it may descend to the depths and investigate the crannies of Miriam Henderson's consciousness. It is a woman's sentence, but only in the sense that it is used to describe a woman's mind by a writer who is neither proud nor afraid of anything that she may discover in the psychology of her sex. (Woolf (1929) 1979 p191)

However, as we move on through the latter half of the 20th century, the problems inherent in any attempt to assemble a set of criteria that constitute or define women's writing becomes the subject of more widespread debate. One

central dilemma characteristic of this debate is clearly articulated by Rachel

Blau DuPlessis in *For the Etruscans* :

The fear that to notice gender in any way becomes destructive to women. Thus the disincentive: if gender categories have been used so destructively, our use of them, is it not "playing into their hands"? (There can be no greater proof of differences in the relative powers of the genders than this argument.) (DuPlessis, 1990 p11)

Whilst not denying these problems, Cixous, however, is determined to offer solutions, or at least a more positive description of the problems. One of her strategies is to side step many difficulties by her use of the word 'feminine'.

At the present time, defining a feminine practice of writing is impossible, with an impossibility that will continue; for this practice will never be able to be theorized, enclosed, coded, which does not mean it does not exist. But it will always exceed the discourse governing the phallogentric system; it takes place and will take place somewhere other than in the territories subordinated to philosophical-theoretical domination. It will not let itself think except through subjects that break automatic functions, border runners never subjugated by any authority. But one can begin to speak. Begin to point out some effects, some elements of the unconscious drives, some relations of the feminine Imaginary to the Real, to writing. (Cixous trans. Conley, 1991 p129)

Earlier in this interview with Conley, Cixous states that her work only uses the words 'masculine' and 'feminine' to describe 'a decipherable libidinal femininity which can be read in a writing produced by a male or a female' (Cixous trans. Conley, 1991 p129). She also makes clear that she derives her usage of these terms from Freud.

We do, however, have to observe that the term 'feminine' is used in everyday language and in this context, often carries negative cultural and social implications. In her chapter on Cixous and *écriture féminine*, Sarah Cornell asks

whether these negative connotations are wholly 'defined by masculine fantasies'. She then answers her own question by identifying a 'femininity' that 'designates the woman as the man wishes her to be' and she goes on to describe this 'femininity' as never having 'anything to do with the femininity of the woman lived by the woman' (Cornell in Wilcox, McWatters, Thompson and Williams, 1990 p37).

When Cixous describes a 'feminine' writing that can be attributed to men or women, she is clearly distancing herself from any such negative associations with the word 'feminine'. She does not, however, opt for a definition of feminine writing that is constructed in opposition to a neo classical, masculine economy; an economy often associated with an ahistorical and appropriating approach.¹¹⁶ Instead Cixous opts for 'poetic writing' which incorporates the existence of sexual indecisiveness, 'there is uncertainty, crossing, blending, interweaving of the two libidinal economies [male and female].¹¹⁷ There is no constraint or restriction that forcibly imposes a binary attribution or distribution of gender' (Cornell in Wilcox et al, 1990 p38-39). For Cixous, men and women can produce this 'poetic writing', indeed many of the examples she uses are male writers – Kafka, Blanchot, Genet, Shakespeare.

In her essay ':re:thinking:literary:feminism: (three essays onto shaky grounds)' Retallack agrees with Cixous' incorporation of male writers, reminding us that 'the power of feminine forms – not least of which is the

¹¹⁶ For a definition of a neo-classical economy and a more detailed explanation of masculine and feminine economies see Still's chapter 'A Feminine Economy' in *The Body and the Text*, Wilcox, McWatters, Thompson and Williams, (1990 p52).

¹¹⁷ My brackets.

power to deconstruct an institutionalised masculine – has been almost exclusively claimed by men, until the latter half of this century'. She asks, 'how is it that men come to enact the feminine?' and responds by observing that exercising such power requires a level of risk. She describes this risk as 'both confusion and ostracism from the academy', and believes it is a challenge that the unsupported social and cultural position of women cannot undertake without, in her words, 'almost certainly disappearing beyond emotional and socially constructed vanishing points' (Retallack in Keller and Miller (Eds.) 1994 p368).

Despite these reasons for including male writing in the classification 'feminine', it remains that, if feminine writing is not exclusively defined by gender, it is necessary to look for other defining characteristics. Françoise Defroment draws our attention to feminine writing's use of metaphor and she goes back to Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own* for an example of a text in which metaphor is present in several guises. It occurs in the title, where metaphor creates both a material and symbolic description of the prerequisites to a writing practice. Then in the walk through the predominantly masculine landscape of Oxbridge. Metaphor is used again when the female subject is placed in the context of a collection of cultural objects: a moment that reveals her as yet another exhibit. And metaphor is present in the final section, where the female practitioner searches for evidence of the validity of her practice within the existing (male dominated) collection of the library.

Defroment also highlights Woolf's use of the nature of landscape and river as a metaphor to describe the processes of women's thought. Woolf contrasts the hard nugget of a fixed, inflexible, masculine truth, 'cut off from its content and in a position to be looked at', with the 'small fish' – a modest but living, moving metaphor for women's thought.¹¹⁸

If metaphor is seen historically, as Defroment suggests, as 'the opposite of a rational and scientific approach', it is rehabilitated in women's writing as having a link with pre-thought, with Kristeva's 'semiotic', with 'deeper essences or ontological questions'.

Defroment describes metaphors as giving flesh to thought, as connected with more primitive forms of language, because they anchor thought into matter, giving it body, thinkable substance, avoiding the separation of abstraction and keeping the process integrated into a material experience of life. The use of metaphor, described in this way, becomes a characteristic of women's writing, and also helps to define those strategies gathered under the heading 'writing from the body' (Defroment in Wilcox et al, 1990 p116-117).

Pursuing this argument, Defroment goes on to look more closely at the way Cixous uses metaphor to connect language with the body, giving as an example Cixous' use of the birth act to bring together the act of procreation and writing. This conjunction inextricably links the body with the book, as nature is meshed with culture and the gesture of writing is recognised as a physical act.

¹¹⁸ See also Carol Gilligan's "web" image for women's thinking. Gilligan, C. (1982) *In a Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women's Development*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

Through this use of the body, Cixous re-approaches metaphor charging it with literal meaning. Quoting Cixous, Defroment gives a clear account of how this takes place:

Words and sounds interplay so that the barrier between the signified and the signifier dissolves as the musical sound is heard, or as Cixous plays with the fictive or real etymological root.....

*'In me the song which, the moment it's uttered, gains instant access to language: a flux immediately text. No break, soundsense, songsound, bloodsong, everything's always already written, all the meanings are cast.' (Pas de coupure, sonsens, chantson, sangson, tout et toujours déjà écrit, tous les sons sont jetés.)*¹¹⁹

....it proceeds (.....) through Cixous' toying with the music of words and through her use of metaphors – images prior to language – both revealing the body of language and producing a body language.
(Defroment in Wilcox et al, 1990 pp121-122)

Broadening her argument, Defroment goes on to suggest that women writers' use of metaphor, 'not only catches the thinking process itself and gives it poetic scope, it also implies a different handling of theory. She again cites Woolf¹²⁰ as claiming that fiction is likely to contain more truth than fact, saying, 'Woolf's writing of theory is remarkable for it breathes in and out, it is pure movement. It ebbs and flows with the same rhythm as her fictions' (Defroment in Wilcox et al, 1990 p118).

Defroment uses the phrase 'stream of consciousness thinking' to describe Woolf's integrated approach to writing, thinking and living. Cixous too uses similar watery metaphors to describe women's methods of writing. She cites Tchoukovskaia as using the phrase 'I am going to plunge' to describe her 'way

¹¹⁹ Paris: *Editions des femmes*, (1976 p84) (Translation:Defroment).

¹²⁰ *A Room of One's Own*, p6.

of going to write' ¹²¹ (Cixous, 1993 p14). And the Brazilian poet and novelist Clarice Lispector, who wrote a text entitled, *The Stream of Life* (Lispector, 1989), is a writer she holds in great respect. Cixous' own writing employs parataxis¹²², moves between the past and the present, the internal and the external, the real and the fantastic to achieve a hybrid, decentred form. It is a technique which cites the tides of the body, the flow of language, the fluid boundary between theory and fiction, the ebb and flow of inspiration, as constituent elements of an extended metaphorical, feminist approach: an approach that not only refers to methods of writing, but also to the nature of authorship

Fluidity, in this context, has a resistance to the notion of a singular authorial authority. For instance, when Denise Riley describes her personal approach to writing poetry, she recalls a moment when she catches her 'borrowed rhetoric at its work on the page'. Noting her reliance on such influences, she admits she appends her signature 'sheepishly' recognising her 'peculiar new status':

....now not so much the author as the editor of my own work
but an author inevitably so conscious of the automata which have leapt
into life without her active consent that she must become a sharp censor.
When the work still fails (as it does fail), that marks a lapse of
retrospective vigilance rather than some shortfall of authorial
'originality'. (Riley, 2000 p96)

In this way Riley finds a position that continues to take full responsibility, whilst acknowledging shared authorship and the role of the

¹²¹ See section 'Videoed Responses' in 'What is it you wish to speak of?' Appendix Two pplix-lxxi.

¹²² A very useful discussion of parataxis including a definition in *Parataxis and Narrative* can be found in Bob Perelman, *An Anthology of New Poetics* (ed) Beach C.(1998).

unconscious. Joan Retallack too adds her weight to such a complex, but rewarding strategy and takes the discussion further when she says:

...it is a woman's feminine text (denying any redundancy) which implicitly acknowledges and creates the possibility of other/additional simultaneous texts. (Retallack in Keller and Miller (Eds.) 1994 p358)

Here is an approach that does not claim an hierarchical status for the writer which exceeds that of the reader, that does not claim authority for the writing. DuPlessis describes it succinctly as, 'Reader could be writer, writer reader. Listener could be teacher' (DuPlessis, 1990 p6). In this way fluidity not only denies singular authorship but also moves into a resistance to form or at least to a singular form, or at least to formality. This can also be interpreted as a resistance to academia, a point expanded by Anita Burrows when she explores the 'porous' aspects of her own approach,

I find myself more and more attracted to the porous, the statement that permits interpretation (penetration?) rather than positing an absolute. Not vagueness – I want each component to be clear – but a whole that doesn't pretend to be ultimate, academic.

(Barrows cited in Koolish, 1981 pp7-8)¹²³

DuPlessis is also resistant to incorporating the academic in any posited definition of women's writing.

It is non-academic; for in order to make a formal presentation, one must have chosen among theses: this is the rhetorical demand. Cannot, in formal argument, say both yes and no, if yes and no are given equal value under the same conditions. Either one or the other has to prevail. But say, in a family argument? Where both, where all, are right? Generates another model of discourse. (DuPlessis, 1990 p6)

¹²³ Anita Barrows, *Form and Fragment*. See also 'Last Words' p327.

'Poetic language' as a genre is often defined against those non-poetic (formal?) genres, which adopt a singular, neutral position. It has been described as a form in which 'the poet by speaking to or evoking her subject also puts herself in play, and at risk; she moves and is moved' (Hirsh in Keller and Miller (Eds.) 1997 p124).

Here we have a new ethical position for sexual difference – 'the creation of a female *genre* that will shift the cultural and symbolic ground of the *I*' (Hirsh, 1997 p124). Such a feminised genre also incorporates the notion of spontaneity. Nicole Ward Jouve draws our attention to the fact that Cixous writes in the present. Jouve describes her process as 'writing blind', 'writing as surprise' and 'writing as a process of projection and discovery' (Jouve in Wilcox, et al, 1990 p42). This writing again incorporates risk and again the writer is often a party to this risk. Jouve is surely citing Lacan when she describes such a writer as 'in a process of self discovery in which the narrative voice is at the same time mirror and analyst' (Jouve in Wilcox et al, 1990 p45).

The methods of such present tense accounts, of such 'feminine writing' have a clear relationship with psychoanalysis and in the following description of this relationship Jouve is also referring to Irigaray's theories of language.

The meanings dormant in etymologies, sounds, permutations of letters, slips of the tongue, are given creative importance. All forms of subjecthood are used – je, tu, elle, elles, vous, nous: the whole scale. The archetypal, the relation to the Other, are all at work in a textuality that is women-centred, not just because the sexuality at work is that of a woman, but because the enterprise is political.

(Jouve in Wilcox et al, 1990 p44)

Rachael Blau DuPlessis supports this notion of politicised self-discovery when she attempts to define the *female aesthetic*, quoting Sybil Cohen¹²⁴ and describing it as beginning

when women take, investigate, the structures of feeling that are ours. And trying to take them, find also the conflict between these inchoate feelings (coded as resistances, coded as the thirsty animals) and patriarchal structures of feeling – romantic thralldom, fear of male anger, and of our own weaknesses of nerve. (DuPlessis, 1990 p11)

Female aesthetic could be seen as some solution to the problematic term 'feminine'. DuPlessis certainly gives a very comprehensive account of the former in 'For the Etruscans':

To define then. "Female aesthetic": the production of formal, epistemological, and thematic strategies by members of the group Woman, strategies born in struggle with much of already existing culture, and over determined by two elements of sexual difference – by women's psychosocial experiences of gender asymmetry and by women's historical status in an (ambiguously) nonhegemonic group. (DuPlessis, 1990 p5)

One example she gives of this aesthetic re-emphasises a wish to dispense with hierarchy. It identifies intimacy as an aspect of such non-hierarchical texts,

Writers know their text as a form of intimacy, of personal contact, whether conversations with the reader or with the self. Letters, journals, voices are sources for this element. (DuPlessis, 1990 p5)

And she again refers to Woolf, who claims that she can see, 'no reason why one should not write as one speaks, familiarly, colloquially' (Woolf (1949) 1974 p 52). Such writing cites anecdote as authority and again makes pleas for a

¹²⁴ Analysis of 'essentialism' as a philosophical concept made by Sybil Cohen to the *Delaware Valley Women's Studies Consortium* (April 1984).

loosely discursive, non-authoritarian voice capable of combining reason with emotion and logic with defiance (DuPlessis, 1990 p5).

Attempting some kind of résumé and quoting Retallack (Retallack in Keller and Miller (Eds.) 1994 p 367) and others, I accumulate a description of women's writing as:

open, diffuse, drifting, shifting, multiple, complex, decentred, non-linear but holistic, filled with silence, fragmented, incorporating difference and the other, porous, hybrid, indefinable, subversive, transgressive, questioning, dissolving identity whilst promoting ethical integrity, materially and contextually pragmatic, non-hierarchical, informal, metaphorical, intimate, inclusive, elastic, capacious, loose woven, knitted, quilted, web like, different, marginal, metonymic, juxtapositional, destabilising, heterogeneous, discontinuous divergent

But does this constitute a viable, workable, definable and above all an autonomous alternative? Or does this terminology still merely represent critiques or exposures of an existing, phallogocentric text? Monique Wittig is one critic who expresses some doubts on this question. She is committed to language as a 'means of conceptual clarity and discursive innovation' and regards Kristeva as adopting, 'the outsider's stance towards the symbolic' (Wittig in Greene and Kahn, 1985 p91). And in her paper, 're:thinking:literary:feminism: (three essays onto shaky grounds)' Joan Retallack describes Luce Irigaray and others as suggesting that:

"the" feminine is perhaps nothing other than a plural – all that conspires against monolithic, monotonal, monolinear, *universes*. Complexities and messes that overflow constriction of *the* have been labelled variously over the centuries, but most strongly identified with the feminine.

She criticises Judith Butler who, she claims, implicitly accepts the normative status of the "intelligible"

...to make gender trouble is to act up as *subtext*: that is, to perform *subversions*: parody pastiche, ironic mirrorings, deconstructive replications. Doing this, she feels, exposes the arbitrariness of the phallogocentric text. But this prescription for a performative feminine subtext does not spring the binary trap. On the contrary, it reinforces it by positing its referential stability and by ignoring strong traditions of multivariant feminine texts.

(Retallack in Keller and Miller (Eds.) 1994 p346)

And if we consider the following statement by Butler in *Gender Trouble*, Retallack's criticism seems to have some validity.

The critical task for feminism is not to establish a point of view outside of constructed identities; that conceit is the construction of an epistemological model that would disavow its own cultural location [...]
The critical task is, rather, to locate strategies of subversive repetition.

(Butler, 1990 p147)

Retallack asks whether our most active and aggressive role is limited to subversion or theft, suggesting that this is an approach that does not attack anything structural. Whilst positing that the male/female binary can be destructive, Retallack is, however, willing to admit that its, 'internal collision and combustions have yielded constructively complex and paradoxical forms [...] resulting in 'not a vision of androgyny, but of range'. She suggests that 'to make useful gender trouble is to make genre trouble' (Retallack in Keller and Miller (Eds.) 1997 P346) and she further describes this strategy as 'opening up explorations into silence, the currently unintelligible – in which our future may make sense' (Retallack in Keller and Miller (Eds.) 1994 p358).

When it comes to describing these alternative forms, however, Retallack seems less certain, resorting to describing them as 'not so much *nonsense* as additional or other sense, our *improbabilities* our *unintelligibilities*...'. Finally, she too seems to hark back to a familiar position of opposition to existing masculine norms, when she describes an 'active (formal) transgression of genre/gender markers' and claims that, 'these are forms which are untainted by 'the systematic devaluation of feminine forms'.

NOWFORSOMETHINGNOTCOMPLETELYDIFFERENTNOWFORSO
(Retallack in Keller and Miller (Eds.) 1994 p359)

There are dangers in a position, which might at first glance seem to conform to the strictures of a psycholinguistic model determined by the primacy of masculine logic; a model in which woman is a gap or a silence, is invisible and unheard. This constitutes part of a wider criticism by many feminists of any stance that relies on, or celebrates marginal discourses – silence, absence, hysteria and delirium. But setting these equivocations aside for a moment, the notion of a space, a moment of unintelligibility could be seen to have useful links not only with Kristeva's *semiotic chora*, but also with what is elsewhere described as 'the imaginary'. In 'The Territory of the Imaginary' Brossard describes *the imaginary* as the speaking of a humanity which has been denied to women in the past and which 'remains hidden in mythology, knowledge and art'. She writes of a moment where sense begins to be made, describing it as a moment 'where I take the imaginary earth out from under your imagined feet...' Brossard refers to Kristeva's originary mother and

forefronts language when she goes on to say 'the origin is not the mother, but the sense I give to words and originally I am a woman'. Brossard describes the process of exploding 'one-way sense' and cites a method that produces a void, 'a mental space which, little by little, will become invested with our subjectivities, this constituting imaginary territory, where our energies will begin to take form' (Brossard, 1988 p111-113). Brossard sees this silence or void as occurring at a moment of crisis 'when the border between what's tolerable and what's intolerable disintegrates or, one might say, when it no longer holds up'. It is at this time, Brossard suggests, that words become void of sense, or assume another meaning, 'Words begin to turn round on themselves inciting reflection, inciting thought toward a new approach to reality'. She is concerned with a 'derived writing', that is writing which is adrift on the border between the real and the fictive, the unthinkable and the inexpressible. This 'desire of/for elusion and desire derived from' is divided into 'elusion desire' a censure of/or deviation from the text's primary intention and 'desire derived from' which originates from an internal certitude and which results therefore in writing that transverses a gynaecological memory' (Brossard, 1988 p73-86). Again we seem to be in the territory of *the imaginary*, but one that acknowledges the body, the maternal presence and the influence of maternal *jouissance*. Brossard returns us to the possibility of Kristeva's 'genitality' of poetic language, to the music of the text and the decentring of the subject. If this is a void, it is one that contains the possibility of new and

continuing life. Returning us also to Woolf and Richardson, here is the potential for a woman's sentence perhaps, written by a woman who is 'neither proud nor afraid of anything that she may discover in the psychology of her sex' (Woolf, 1979 p191).

It would only seem necessary to add that, even if any definition of what might be, or has been, or is a feminine text, or women's writing, is problematic, I hope I have demonstrated that it is a problem that leads us into critically fruitful territory.

And here I become aware of my potential audience – not a climate of male disapproval, or of potential criticism, but an audience of women writers. For this reason I choose to go back to 1975 and, suggesting that her statement still has currency in 2007, leave the last word to Nicole Brossard. In the opening paper at the annual international conference of women writers in Quebec, she encourages other women writers with the following words:

For me, what is important at the present time is that women write, aware that their difference must be explored in the knowledge of themselves who have become subjects and further, subjects involved in a struggle. To explore this difference is necessarily to inscribe it in a language which questions the sexism of the tongues we speak and write. By that very fact we inaugurate new places for writing and reading: by that very fact we inscribe in culture a literature of the unspoken. An unauthorized and unspoken literature.

(Forsyth citing Brossard in Brossard, 1988 p12)

Mid-Conversation

Up to this point I have been concerned with establishing autobiography as a conceptual frame, with identifying and defining other important areas of concern and with revisiting influential theory.

I will now focus on two scripts for live performance. Both of these scripts continue my investigation of the characteristics of women's writing. They are also concerned with performance and its significance for women's identity. The notion of performance in relation to gender has been central to recent feminist thinking. Much of this interest has been stimulated by the work of Judith Butler. In *Subjects of Desire* (1987), *Gender Trouble* (1990) and *Excitable Speech* (1997) and in her seminal essay 'Performative Acts and Gender Constitution' (1998), Butler sets out a complex theory of the performance of identity that has particular implications for women. These theories significantly shifted my thinking and both of the performance scripts that follow use my methodology of 'writing through' to test and open up some of Butler's theories. In this sense Butler's ideas provide an overall context for this work. For this reason I am prefacing the commentary on the scripts with the following definition from the Butler essay mentioned above.

....gender is in no way a stable identity or locus of agency from which various acts proceed; rather, it is an identity tenuously constituted in time – an identity instituted through a *stylised repetition of acts*. Further gender is instituted through the stylisation of the body and, hence, must be understood as the mundane way in which bodily gestures, movements, and enactments of various kinds constitute the illusion of an abiding gendered self. This formulation moves the conception of gender off the ground of a substantial model of identity to one that requires a

conception of a constituted *social temporality*. Significantly, if gender is instituted through acts which are internally discontinuous, then the *appearance of substance* is precisely that, a constructed identity, a performative accomplishment which the mundane social audience, including the actors themselves, come to believe and to perform in the mode of belief. If the ground of gender identity is the stylised repetition of acts through time, and not a seemingly seamless identity, then the possibilities of gender transformation are to be found in the arbitrary relation between such acts, in the possibility of a different sort of repeating, in the breaking or subversive repetition of that style.

(Butler, 1998 pp519-520)

The contextualised investigations of 'The True Aerialist' and 'Tracings' that follow, provide an opportunity for me to exploit my dual role as writer and reader. I use my knowledge of my personal development of this work as the basis for a wider discussion of its implication for women's writing in general.

My first example, *The True Aerialist*, features a single woman's search for a viable performance strategy. My commentary considers how, during the course of this exploration, the True Aerialist questions the performance of identity and the difficulty of establishing meaningful dialogue.

My commentary on *Tracings*, a full-length performance script for four characters, is divided into two parts. The first part, 'Myth', discusses women writers' prevalent use of mythological themes and characters. The second part of the commentary, 'Beginning Again', considers the structure and composition of the script: its use of repetition and revisiting. These are methodologies often associated with women's writing and they also operate within this thesis.

The True Aerialist

Reckless Repartee

From the beginning I wrote for performance and as I explain in *The/My Female Voice*, my first impetus to write for live performance emerged directly out of observation of the experiences of a particular group of women. My second play was concerned with the life and difficulties of a disabled woman and every subsequent writing project, be it for performance, for the page, or for digital film, has been concerned with some aspect of women's experience.

I recognise that, any generalised use of the word 'woman' is problematic, and it is equally questionable to suggest that women's experience is in any way common. However, I am concerned with the way in which each individual woman's story contributes to an understanding of femininity. The experience of the female performer is inevitably of interest to a female playwright and so it makes a particularly pertinent contribution to my knowledge. In this section I explore that experience through the performance of the True Aerialist.

When I joined the Theatre Department at Dartington College of Arts in 1990 I was exposed to a particular approach to physical Theatre pioneered by the College at that time.¹²⁵ This approach was indebted to a group of theatre makers and practitioners who sought to question existing literary British theatre tradition through techniques that challenged narrative structures, heightened

¹²⁵ I write now in 2007 as an Associate Lecturer in the Department. Though their methods have been modified over the years, the Dartington Theatre Course still has a unique approach, an original mix of improvised and devised theatre practices that rely heavily on the influence of physical theatre techniques.

delivery of text and a range of performance strategies and scenographic techniques that rely on pretence. I was interested in the implications of these strategies for the female performer. I was also concerned with their possible impact on my developing concept of the relationship between women, writing and identity. Following my usual methodology, I decided to explore some of these issues through a writing project. The performance script *The True Aerialist* is the result.

My authorship of this monologue for female performer could also be described as an autobiographical act. When a single performer of the same sex is the only voice available to me as a playwright, I am effectively creating a situation where I have the opportunity to talk to myself.

In an acknowledgment and extension of this premise, I decided to embed my commentary in the script. I chose this method as a way of creating a dialogue between the words of the True Aerialist and my response as a critical reader. The top half of the page is dedicated to a section of the script, recorded in the order that it occurs in the play. These sections add up to a complete version of the play. The lower half, below the solid line, contains my commentary. For complete clarity the play script, as source text and original writing, is represented in **bold** type.

In my introduction I express some reservations about the hazards of this particular approach to the task of writing a commentary for *The True Aerialist*. In *driving home*¹²⁶ I mention a personal predisposition towards **reckless repartee** and at several points in the process of writing this commentary, I felt constrained by the dialogue form, by the temptation to frame a neat or clever response. I tried to resist this temptation as much as possible, often using the True Aerialist herself as an arbiter of my 'integrity'. I tried to imagine how she might respond to my commentary, how she might deny my understanding.

I tested out various forms of layout, including the page columns used by Kristeva in 'Stabat Mater' (Kristeva in Suleiman (Ed.) 1986 p 99-118) and on several occasions I was close to deciding that I should revert to a more conventional representation of script and commentary. However, in the end I was reluctant to abandon the experiment of creating a potential dialogue between script and commentary. I decided on the layout shown here because it allows the possibility of constantly re-reading the portion of the script to which the section of commentary refers. I believed this ability to move continually between the two goes some way to representing the process of writing for performance. It gives access to the layers of meaning embedded in any moment of dialogue.

The human mind. The human mind does play.
The human mind. Plays because it plays.
Human Nature. Does not play because it does not play again.
It might desire something but it does not play again.

¹²⁶ Autobiographical writing pp85-108.

And so to make excitement and not nervousness into a play.

And then to make a play with just the human mind.

Let us try.

To make a play with human nature and not anything of the human
mind.

(Stein in Haas, 1971 p117)

THE TRUE AERIALIST

'The feeling of inauthenticity under certain linguistic circumstances, of not being able to tell the truth, however strenuously one struggles to reach it – isn't this feeling commoner than is usually acknowledged?'
(Riley, 2000 p57)

The True Aerialist is a monologue for live female performance. It attempts to challenge conventional notions of performance, whilst simultaneously demonstrating some of the difficulties facing the single female performer. This is achieved through a series of contradictions that begin with the play's title and the True Aerialist's claim to be a liar. From this first moment she subverts the audience's perception of her as a woman and a performer and her punning, playful approach continues to question voice, narrative, dialogue, subtext, characterisation and pretence.

The True Aerialist's predisposition to lying is proposed as an aspect of self-description. She emphasizes it in her first speech and reminds the audience of this trait throughout the performance. She also refers to herself later in the performance as 'not a true aerialist' but gives rather unconvincing reasons for this. Given that she is a self-confessed liar, we could assume that she *is* an aerialist. However, her unsuccessful attempts to fly would seem to present a demonstrable rebuttal to this claim.

Subtitled
THE ANGEL IN THE HOUSE

A subtitle can be defined as a word, phrase or sentence that is used as the second part of a text's title and is printed at the front of the text under the main title. We also use subtitles in the showing of films where they translate one language into another. When it adopts the word 'house' the subtitle 'The Angel in the House' refers both to the performance aspect of the piece and to the traditional role of women. The noun 'house' is used most commonly to describe the physical dimension of a home, and it is used to describe a theatre auditorium. 'The Angel in the House' also alludes to the terminology used by Virginia Woolf to sum up those aspects of the domestic role, which Woolf considers that women have to escape in order to become successful writers.

'She was intensely sympathetic. She was immensely charming. She was utterly unselfish. She excelled in the difficult arts of family life. She sacrificed herself daily. If there was chicken, she took the leg; if there was a draft, she sat in it [...] And when I came to work, I encountered her with the very first words. The shadow of her wings fell on my page; I heard the rustling of her skirts in the room. [...] Killing the Angel in the House was part of the occupation of a woman writer.'

(Woolf (1929)1979 p59)

A WOMAN DRESSED IN AN ECLECTIC RANGE OF STYLES CROSSES THE SPACE CASTING ONE FURIOUS SIDEWAYS GLANCE AT THE AUDIENCE BEFORE EXITING.

From the first moment, the True Aerialist challenges her audience and their perception of her as a woman and a performer. She does this initially by only presenting herself momentarily for their gaze. She is also not merely the recipient of this brief, visual encounter, but seeks to be active, pre-empting any audience/performer assumptions by her own aggressive attitude. The True Aerialist moves rapidly and her costume gives no clue to her potential persona or character, except to suggest its eclecticism. Her side-ways glance sidelines their observations to a momentary irritant. There is within this initial action a comment on those theories that concentrate on women as recipients of the gaze. Laura Mulvey when describing classical cinema, identifies a binary, gender-based opposition present in narrative structure. She claims this establishes an active and powerful male character around which the dramatic action takes place. The female character, on the other hand, is passive and powerless, operating as an object of desire not only for the male character but also for the film's spectator. This spectator identifies with the more powerful male hero and takes up not only his optical view of the woman, but also his libidinal view. The True Aerialist opens her interaction with the audience by posing a challenge to this potential for voyeurism; she 'actively' allows little time for her 'to-be-looked-at-ness' (Mulvey, 1989 p19) to be established.

Simultaneously, in her action of entering and almost immediately exiting, the True Aerialist is subverting those traditions of performance that begin with the entrance of a performer, who then remains in the performance space until they have delivered their first speech to the audience or have enacted their first encounters with other performers. Further the script does not assume that this performance will take place in a traditional performance space, a stage within a theatre. The directions only designate 'the space'.

The True Aerialist is also, by this initial action, emphasizing the transience of her 'centre stage' position. In her essay 'A Fool's Discourse: The Buffoonery Syndrome', Mady Schutzman observes that in psychoanalytical terminology 'astasia-abasia (the "hysterical gait") is a walk in which the patient appears to be trying to fall. She performs it only when she knows she is being observed; her deliberate performance of instability is as much a commentary on her condition as it is the condition itself' (Phelan and Lane, 1998 p133). This dash into the performance space and immediate exit is self-conscious of observation and conforms to a deliberate performance of instability. It becomes a commentary on the transience of this particular moment of self-presentation.

THE SAME WOMAN RE-ENTERS AND REPEATS HER ACTIONS.

Repetition¹²⁷ gives emphasis and underlines the strength of purpose and intent of the True Aerialist. She is reinforcing her right to adopt this set of actions and attitudes – to do it again whilst releasing no further information. She is claiming the performance space for the first time, a second time, whilst again denying her audience enough time to 'view'.

¹²⁷ See more on repetition in 'Beginning Again', 'Tracings' pp299-308.

THE SAME WOMAN RE-ENTERS A THIRD TIME, STOPS MID-SPACE AND TAKES UP A JABBING, POINTING ACTION AIMED AT THE AUDIENCE. AFTER A SECOND OR TWO HER FINGER BECOMES OUT OF CONTROL AND TURNS TOWARDS HER MAKING FOR HER MOUTH AND FORCING ITSELF DOWN HER THROAT, CHOKING OUT HER FIRST WORDS.

Through the use of this pointing action the True Aerialist is attempting to confirm her active role in relation to the audience. It is also an accusatory gesture, one associated with didactic rhetoric or blame. When this accusation, turns back on the True Aerialist, her volition is removed and she appears to be controlled by outside forces. Butler questions whether the agency of language is the same as the agency of the subject and suggests that agency may lie in the power of naming. She quotes Althusser as postulating 'a voice that brings that subject into being' (Butler, 1997 p25). When the subject speaks what she is, when she addresses others, Butler suggests that she is claiming (her own) power to name, but Butler also questions the agency available within that power.

I.....(TRIUMPHANTLY).....I lie....

The True Aerialist is clearly reluctant to speak and when forced her first words are cleverly designed to render any subsequent utterances untruthful and therefore invalid. She is by this first speech simultaneously claiming her own power to name and denying the validity of such an utterance now or in the future. It is in Butler's terminology a 'performative utterance', one that does not reflect or express meaning, but produces it. However, there is a further complication here, as the meaning this utterance enacts simultaneously denies meaning. This is an attempt to contain within the piece those notions of the impossibility of linguistic meaning put forward by Kristeva and Irigaray and Butler and discussed in 'Revisiting *Écriture Féminine*'.¹²⁸ I refer here to theories that contain an anxiety about a single system of language based on the law of the father, that identify its repressive and exclusive (of the feminine) reliance on the symbolic

¹²⁸ pp113-159.

By relinquishing any intention to speak the truth, the True Aerialist is claiming a pathology. She is refusing to adhere to existing rules, setting herself outside those conventions of language that rely on established notions of the woman as subject in the symbolic.¹²⁹ She is effectively shifting this position and her position as the subject of enunciation, by disallowing the audience any opportunity to act as the interlocutor, the receiver of meaning, the addressed other (sex).¹³⁰

¹²⁹ See an extended discussion of the subject in the section *Speak*, Appendix Two pp xliii-liv. See also pp 124-125 on the enunciating subject.

¹³⁰ See later tactics of complicity p 175.

**CLAMPS RIGHT HAND OVER MOUTH. REMOVES IT WITH
DIFFICULTY
USING OTHER HAND.**

This action of silencing ¹³¹ could be seen as influenced by outside forces, but it is enacted by the True Aerialist. With one hand she attempts to silence herself, but is also seen to be capable of resisting or undoing her own instinctive action. As she acts out the battle, the possibility of speaking triumphs.

Performing this action the True Aerialist is seen as a split subject¹³² as not singular, see also the next part of this commentary, which is concerned with such a pluralized subject.

¹³¹ See an extended discussion in the sections 'Talk' and 'Speak' Appendix Two pp xliii-liv.

¹³² See footnote 93 on intersubjectivity.

.... constantly. I deceive....

CLAMPS RIGHT HAND OVER MOUTH AGAIN AND AGAIN REMOVES IT WITH DIFFICULTY.

.... perpetually. I

LOOKS AT HAND AS IF EXPECTING IT TO COVER MOUTH. IT DOESN'T.

.... I conceal...

INSTEAD HAND CLAMPS OVER EYES. SHE STRUGGLES TO REMOVE. what I see.

LOOKS ABOUT FURTIVELY

And I pretend....

LOOKS ABOUT AGAIN

.... what I am. Believe me.

BECOMES CONFIDENTIAL

Oh believe me – you can't. (SHOUTS) Because...

LOOKS ABOUT

(WHISPERS) Nothing about me is true.

The True Aerialist perceives herself as overlooked, overseen, at the mercy of unseen forces that would seek to inhibit her confessions of deceit. She embodies these unseen forces as they attempt to take over and control her gestures. This potential interlocutor is internalised and a subsequent invitation from the True Aerialist, to her audience, an invitation to complicity means that they cannot remain separate, either from her or from these unseen forces. They are not allowed to passively 'view' a hermetic and singular persona. What they understand from this performance moment implies plurality, that the identity

of the True Aerialist is constructed or inscribed. And if they try to find some clarification of their position from what the True Aerialist says, her request that the audience believe her denials is denied; is a disallowed invitation. She puts her audience in an impossible position, whilst simultaneously inviting their complicity.

**HAND OVER MOUTH, EYES MOVE FROM SIDE TO SIDE. REMOVES
HAND WITH DIFFICULTY. FINGER STARTS JABBING, IS RETRIEVED
BY OTHER HAND AND PLACED ACROSS LIPS.**

Shush, keep quiet, don't spill the beans.

The True Aerialist attempts to deepen the complicity between herself and her audience by co-opting them into a secret conspiracy. However, in the following action her physicality becomes 'out of control' and effectively diverts her from this strategy.

FINGER MAKES BID FOR NOSTRIL

Aah!

FINGERS HOLD NOSE.

(SINGS) Aah, aah.

SMACKS HAND OFF NOSE, SINGS UP SCALE. (Ah, ah, ah, etc.)

(SINGS ON A LONG NOTE) Aria!

Even my voice is false – an echo

VOICE OFF (MALE) SINGS FALSETTO Aria!

Falsetto. So please do not count on my ethnic origin.

PULLS ONE EYE DOWN, TWISTS EAR

It reveals nothing of my date of birth.

In the statement 'Even my voice is false – an echo.' and in the two vocalisations of 'aria' the True Aerialist is commenting on those theories which claim that there is a contradiction at the heart of any definition of women's voice. A contradiction that haunts any attempt by women to, as Xaviere Gauthier describes it, 'speak otherwise'. Gauthier goes on to describe women as speaking a language of words that are killing them, 'made up of signs that rightly speaking designate what men have appropriated' (Gauthier (1974) in Marks and de Courtivron, 1981 p163).

The True Aerialist manages to vocalise some of these issues, whilst complicating things even further by demonstrating that if her voice is an echo of another voice – a male voice – that this male voice is itself an echo of a female voice. We hear and understand that it is an appropriated female voice, when it sings falsetto. No wonder the True Aerialist allows herself to laugh at this conundrum.

LAUGHS JOYOUSLY, COVERS MOUTH. REMOVES HAND, STICKS OUT TONGUE.

Why even my tongue – (SPEAKS IN FOREIGN LANGUAGE) My mother tongue. (TRANSLATES) My mother tongue. (SIGNS) Says nothing. (TRANSLATES) Says nothing. But a mother tongue has gender at least, whereas I – what am I?

The term 'mother tongue' is used by Alicia Ostriker to describe what she describes as a 'subterranean current' that exists 'below the surface structure of male-oriented language, a specifically female language.' She describes this language as used by women to 'subvert and transform the life and literature they inherit' (Ostriker (1986) in Keller and Miller, 1994 p211). The True Aerialist admits the possibility that such a tongue may be what might be described as a 'gendered voice' but she distances herself from it. This strategy would support Retallack's suggestion that there is a risk in the adoption of such a gendered voice, that it can effectively condemn female writers to 'lurk in the subjective (private), subterranean, subaltern world of subversive self-definition (Retallack in Keller and Miller (Eds.) 1994 p365). The True Aerialist is clearly not content to remain within such a circumscribed world. Her presence on stage is enough to suggest that she has a wider brief and one which emerges out of an identity that cannot be contained in such binary oppositions. She goes on to explain:

HOLDS FOREFINGER UP AND EXAMINES IT.

Mutable?

FOLLOWS OUTSTRETCHED FINGER MOVING DIAGONALLY

Transverse perhaps? What do you think? Have a guess. Go on, do us a favour.

ZIG ZAGS WITH FINGER.

Left or right? In or out? Back to front? What's it to be? 50/50? 30/70? 100 to one? Well you're wrong. Wrong, wrong, Naa, naa, na, naa, naa.

FINGER POINTS TO BREAST.

I won.

FINGER MAKES PENIS

I won. I'm unclassifiable.

The True Aerialist is here claiming her release from binary constraints. She advances from this 50/50 position, proposing one which functions not from left to right, or from one to the other, but at an angle: 'transverse', and following this with actions that suggest hermaphroditic physical attributes: breasts and a penis. Retallack comments on Butler's use of the term 'heterosexual matrix' when she claims,

Beyond the vanishing point lie shocking scenes: in which exposed negatives reveal a dominatrix with polymorphously perverse appetites and ambitions wreaking havoc in the popular maxiseries, "Civilization and Miss Content".

She valorises an insistence on complexity which she would suggest, 'lies in forms that engage the dynamics of multiplicity (three and more). In acknowledgment of difference, yes, but more importantly in generating a proliferation of possibility beyond invidious dualities' (Retallack in Keller and Miller (Eds.) 1994 p347- 360).

Drawing conclusions on a set of interviews conducted with women performers, Alison Oddey suggests that performance provides some women with an opportunity to enhance their sense of identity. She suggests that the opportunity to perform provides 'the opportunity for identity construction or the expression of multiple identities'. Oddey draws evidence to support a description of these female performers as having the chance to explore 'alternate versions' of themselves (Oddey, 2002 p279). She proposes that:

As 'performing women', they are adept at performing multiple identities which are socially constructed roles. They are clearly conscious of gender as a 'performative act', not simply in terms of the roles that they play on stage, but in their roles as working mothers, as youngest daughters wives or partners, and as children wanting to play. These women are performing roles in public life, as public figures or idols having to live up to the image that the media has created for them. They have been trained to internalise all the roles they are playing, being judged on how believable they are, and if they have moved the audience. It is small wonder then that they ask about the self, questioning their identity.' (Oddey, 2002 p280)

But Oddey also describes some of these women performers as aspiring to the notion of the unitary self, having a humanist vision of the artist, a commitment to communicate the universal. The True Aerialist could not be accused of subscribing to this position. Partly because it is not clear whether she is performing some donated character or persona or a version of herself. She also uses various strategies to actively demonstrate and celebrate the plurality of her identity.

WAVES BOTTOM AT AUDIENCE, POINTS AT IT.

The class of my arse changes all the time.

You can't rely on it. Some days I can't even sit on it. But on such days, on such sweet spring days, when the dew gathers on my fingertips. On such fine, blue days I can – always....

STANDS AND OPENS OUT A PAIR OF WINGS

Fly.

Flying is woman's gesture – flying in language and making it fly.....What woman hasn't flown/stolen? Who hasn't felt, dreamt, performed the gesture that jams sociality?.... Who, by some act of transgression, hasn't overthrown successiveness, connection, the wall of circumfusion?
(Cixous (1975) 1976 p888)

(PROUDLY) They are my own wings. There is no artifice in them.
EXAMINES WINGS
Some glue perhaps.
SHAKES WINGS OUT
But I will not deny them for a moment. I'm no angel, but that's another matter. The shaft of my feathers is my own affair – entirely.
TAKES KNICKERS OFF.
(DECLAIMS) I fly by the seat of my pants!
PUTS KNICKERS ON HEAD LIKE FLYING HELMET/GOGGLES

In adopting this 'over the top' persona, complete with foolish, self-mocking actions, the True Aerialist is behaving in a way described by Mady Schutzman in 'A fool's Discourse: The Buffoonery Syndrome'. Schutzman claims to assert the power of excess by disappearing into the spectacle of excess. She introduces her discussion of female buffoonery in the following way:

Speaking of hysterical excess – Jean Martin Charcot, the French neurologist who defined hysteria and charted its "phases" in photographic tableaux, named the second phase of hysteria "the phase of clownism", or the buffoonery syndrome. It was characterized by a series of protracted movements and grand gestures...Women perform sheer energy, broadcasting the infinite potential to be preposterous and making a bizarre and yet enticing show of the violation of the female image. In corporeal expletives and exclamations, the hysteric (of both medical science and contemporary advertising) embodies the gender disorders of the social body and simultaneously screams her distress. Her excessive visual presence both disguises and disclaims her assigned absence within the social sphere. Put yet another way, in her overstated assumption of the mask of femininity, she indicts the very power politics that her body economy suffers. She plays the clown.

(Schutzman in Phelan and Lane, 1998 p131-2)

(DECLAIMS) On a wing and a prayer! So wish me luck, because you never know.... Christ you never know.....

KNEELS TO PRAY

(ASIDE) Superstition being the enemy of belief. You never know....(DECLAIMS)

Oh god, please let me come up on the lottery! Yes, I'll buy a ticket. And if you see me praying in my lottery booth – my twentieth century confessional – remember – STANDS, HOOKS ON WIRE

I'm hooked.

OPENS WINGS CEREMONIOUSLY AND VERY SLOWLY RISES INTO THE

AIR, HANDS PRAYING, ONE LEG CROOKED LIKE AN ANGEL TO THE MUTED STRAINS OF A SILVERY BOY SOPRANO SINGING A RELIGIOUS ANTHEM

This is inspirational. The sky is radiant. I fly – a silver meteor in its twinkling blueness! I fly – a stainless shard piercing the velvet of night! I fly – a mote of mercury beading the crested ocean! I fly.....

STARES BALEFULLY AT AUDIENCE, DROPS WINGS

Oh come on, it's allowed – a little lyricism, a little lyric, a moment of romance – surely it's allowed?

In her essay on women's long poems, Susan Stanford Friedman identifies the position held by Kristeva and Cixous, amongst others, in relation to narrative and the lyric. She describes their attitude in the following way:

These theorists have variously suggested that what they loosely call "poetry", the "poetic" or the "lyric" is the avant-garde of modernity's disruptions of the symbolic order. They often associate narrative (and often the novel or prose), on the other hand with a regressive representationalism or mimesis, with, in other words, the tyranny of the symbolic order.

(Friedman in Keller and Miller, 1994 p15)

This is a succinct summing up and reading Kristeva for more detail, we note that she identifies a “signifying practice” and clearly links the semiotic with the lyric, the feminine and the pre-oedipal, whilst associating the symbolic with narrative, the masculine and the oedipal (Kristeva, (1974) 1984 p23-30).

At this point in the play the True Aerialist is establishing her right to the lyric. Her additional claim to 'subversion of another's soul', mirrors the transgressive disruption of narrative by the poetic.

FLAPPING WINGS BUT NOT GETTING VERY FAR.

You can't deny poetry – my soul in verse, a version of my soul, subversion of your soul, through my....

LIFTS WINGS IN DRAMATIC GESTURE

.... art!

POSING WITH WINGS EXTENDED

What an image, what an imagining.

TURNING ROUND TO DISPLAY WINGS, SPEAKING OVER SHOULDER.

Imagination being art.

OVER OTHER SHOULDER

Some say.

BEATING WINGS RHYTHMICALLY

I am a star, I am a star, I am a star, I am above it all, above you all. An artiste of the air, full of wind and piss. Spraying you from a great height.

INSTRUMENTAL VERSION OF ROY ORBISON'S SONG 'CRYING'

BEGINS

Look at me. Just look at me!

FLIES AROUND, SINGS.

Flying over you. Flying over you.

Good aren't I? Terrific. I'm wonderful, wondrous, I'm a bleeding wonder I am. (SINGS) Flying over you, over you, over yooooou.

MUSIC STOPS WITH SCRAPE OF NEEDLE. WOMAN LOOKS

ANXIOUSLY TO SIDE STAGE

What? No, no I haven't... no, no wing licence.

CLEARs THROAT, SPEAKS FORMALLY TO AUDIENCE

It has occurred to me that I have no artistic licence for my superior state.

DROPS ON WIRE SUDDENLY, LOOKS DOWN ANXIOUSLY

It has further come to my notice that.... DROPS

I can't.... DROPS AGAIN

Ah shit – it's like one of those dreams – you're flying quite happily, superiorly in fact, and then... DROPS

you suddenly realise.....

WIRE DROPS SO HAS TO LIFT FEET TO AVOID LANDING

But regulations aren't everything. Oh ho, no ho! You can buck the system.

STARTS FLAPPING WINGS

Fight the bureaucracy.

FLAPS FRANTICALLY

You can stop hanging about and.... and.... and....

FLAPS AND KICKS LEGS BESERKLY

You can, you can, argh, ooh, oh oh, help me help me, please, please, help me.

SCREAMING WINGS WIDE

Help!

CLOSES WINGS AGAIN, HANGS FROM THE WIRE LIKE A LIFELESS PUPPET.

Sorry – really – very sorry. I was carried away. Taken for a ride. I was strung along. Puppetry has a lot to answer for. Talk about suspension of belief. It's asking a lot of a liar like me. There's a real danger I could get hung here – lynched for my upward mobility. To think.....has I come to this? Has it? TRIES TO FLY BUT WINGS KEEP DROPPING, HANGS INERT

Now I know how Tinkerbell felt. It isn't fair – no – liar that I am, stuck up as I may be –

I can't help having aspirations.

TRIES TO FLY BUT WINGS KEEP DROPPING. BRUSHES SELF DOWN AND TRIES TO LOOK UNCONCERNED, HANGS FOR SOME TIME SUCKING A FEATHER, SIGHS, THROWS FEATHER AWAY.

Ah well, I was never a true aerialist. I was never a real flyer. No head for heights you see – not enough levity in my thoughts. I lack confidence. I can't ride a bicycle or swim. SIGHS AGAIN Yes, on many counts my expectation of levitation was unrealistic.

Given my many shortcomings. But.... well it's a tendency I have.

Despite all – I tend to the unreal.

SYNTHESIZED MOOD MUSIC, FLAPS ONE WING, FLAPS THE OTHER.

I am subject to flights of fantasy.

FLAPS BOTH AND RISES UP, BECOMES UNSTABLE, SWINGS AND SWAYS RECKLESSLY.

I get above myself.

JOLTS TO A HALT, MUSIC STOPS ABRUPTLY. FOLDS WINGS AGAIN AND HANGS LIMPLY

I put myself in a vertiginous position – up here where the oxygen is thin.

In her paper on women and buffoonery, Mady Schutzman is also, like the True Aerialist, engaged in precariousness, 'I let precariousness and speculation riddle my body. I fly through the air in impossible postures, hang precipitously over empty space...' is adopting this risky position as an antidote to her own boredom with what she describes as 'futile attempts to redeem vapid, anti-committal, post-modern ambiguity and obscurity from its entertaining but safe epistemological theories.' Schutzman claims that by this precarious strategy she effectively ceases to resist

the spectacle of inappropriateness to which I am assigned, I indulge the dignity of inappropriateness, and in this disappearance I am shamelessly full. In embodying spectacle I assume presence, and this presence, even if marked lacking, adds subjectivity to that which is thought to be without it. (Schutzman in Phelan and Lane, 1998 p138)

I have some difficulty with Schutzman's response to certain theoretical positions, 'I'm bored with futile attempts to redeem vapid, anti-committal, postmodern ambiguity and obscurity from its entertaining but safe epistemological theories'. And the True Aerialist is also clearly not as comfortable as Schutzman with her precariousness, assigning it to a tendency towards the unreal.

If I have some sympathy with Mady Schutzman's contention that embodying spectacle can give power to a presence denoting lack, it remains, in performance terms, (as she too admits) an extremely risky strategy.

But finally, I feel ridiculous and I can't sustain the effort. I fear that my abandon to spectacle will betray me, appear as complicity with the very power structure I despise. Presence for the feminist critic is a dance with phobia. (Schutzman in Phelan and Lane, 1998 p138)

The True Aerialist's discomfort with precariousness emerges from a lack of confidence in her ability to achieve the required performance strategies. There is also an implication that this lack of confidence may extend to herself, to her level of self-confidence. Such an implication could further reflect on the 'performative' nature of identity. In this context the True Aerialist is not sure that she can fully achieve the level or quality of spectacle required and this prompts her to fall back (physically) into a (literally) more 'grounded', reality-based position.

CLAPS ARMS AROUND WINGS AND DROPS TO FEET
Better to have my feet on the ground.
UNHOOKS WIRE, LIES DOWN
My nose to the grindstone.
THUMPS FLOOR

The following speeches focus on narrative following those associations put forward by Kristeva ((1974) 1984 p58-59). First the True Aerialist links narrative with verisimilitude, with a concentration on reality....

Real life, real work, real, honest to goodness, made with natural ingredients,
at the kitchen sink, tell it like it is. Let mine be a true story. A real story.
Starting here, now. Shall we.....?
STANDS

.....then with systems of religion, with genres such as the mythic and the epic.

And the earth was waste and void; and darkness was upon the face of the deep: and the spirit of god moved upon the face of the waters.

ROLLS UP SKIRT TO FORM PREGNANT SHAPE

There, they won't hang me now, I can't get strung up in this state. I'm safe.... for now..

Here the True Aerialist recognises that such narratives rely on an 'oedipally constituted structure of the family' (Kristeva. ((1974) 1984 p91). This is a view which gives due reverence to the pregnant woman in her reproductive role. The True Aerialist, however, is resistant to a role which potentially gives her both protection and an enduring position in the biological 'narrative of life'.

SQUATS, STRAINS
Until after the birth
LAYS EGG
Of my beginning.
PICKS UP EGG
(SENTIMENTAL) My beginning.

Even if the True Aerialist seems to accede to her position as provider of 'biological beginnings', she soon subverts this by her subsequent actions: by her random production of beginnings, by her casual/careless playing with them, by their destruction at her hands.

PRODUCES ANOTHER EGG FROM MOUTH AND ONE FROM BEHIND
EAR. JUGGLES WITH THE EGGS, DROPS ONE, LOOKS FROM IT TO
THE AUDIENCE.

The big bang theory?

THROWS REST TO FLOOR

So much for beginnings – Once upon a time, long ago, as I've heard tell, there
was, as there might well be.... (IRRITABLE) Well are you sitting comfortably?
Quite sure? Then I'll begin. (WHISPERS) There was once a story, a
narrative no less. And it was huge, essential, overarching and predictable
and we all looked up to it and aspired to it in every waking moment of our
dreary little lives, we woke up from dreams of it and went to sleep praying
for it. There.... isn't that nice. A nice story eh? A story with a....

HOLDS HANDS HIGH ABOVE HEAD

.... beginning

POINTS AT PREGNANT STOMACH

a middle... and (MUTTERS) an end. (SHOUTS) I said an end.

MUSIC 'SOMEWHERE OVER THE RAINBOW'. PUTS HAND OVER EYES
AND LOOKS INTO THE DISTANCE

Hey is that a rainbow up there?

DROPS ARM DESPONDENTLY

No, just a trick of the light.

SIGHS

A trick, a story that no-one believes in any more. Because no-one believes in
nothing. Except the lottery. Two minuses don't make a plus. First there was
eggs and then there was mess.

The True Aerialist underlines the loss of narrative, but again seems to
contradict her own statement when she employs the double negative, 'no-one
believes in nothing.'

JUMPING TO ONE SIDE AS IF TWO CHARACTERS ADDRESSING EACH OTHER.

Who made this bloody mess and who's going to clear it up?

I'm not.

Why not?

Because it's not my turn.

Why not?

You just said that.

So what?

So now it's your turn.

What?

Your turn to clear up

Why?

Because you spoke first.

Did I?

Yes.

So?

So I've got the last word.

So?

So the last word is you've got to clear up

Well I won't.

NO REPLY

I said I won't.

NO REPLY

That was the last word.

NO REPLY

I said the last word.

NO REPLY

Are you listening?

NO REPLY

Are you there?

NO REPLY

Is there anybody?

The True Aerialist draws our attention to the way dramatic dialogue functions. Keir Elam writes that a 'degree of flexibility is called for in reading performer-performer interaction onstage as a model of face-to-face social intercourse'. He goes on to say that a set of interactional conventions arise which apply less to the transaction between actor and audience 'as to the actor-actor exchange'. The spectator then makes various corrections to this representation of interpersonal communication in order to accept it as an 'iconic' portrayal of social encounter (Elam, 1987 p91).

The True Aerialist's adoption of both roles, comments on the conventions of dialogue. It does this by emphasising the lack of interruption and turn taking prevalent in such performed dialogue. She also questions her own ability to be both speaker and listener, subject and predicate, whilst simultaneously confirming herself as alone in the performance space.

I am also making reference here to the split in the subject between symbolic identity and the body described by Lacan and occurring when the subject enters into a system of language.¹³³ At this moment the True Aerialist literally splits herself into two: a speaker and a listener. In this dual guise, she demonstrates the difficulties of such an operation, by linking the ability to

¹³³See 'Revisiting *Écriture Féminine*' pp128-142.

demand action of another with the ability to speak. Eventually one of the pair is lost, is no longer listening, no longer 'there'.

The True Aerialist then ends by pre-empting any prejudices that may exist concerning interaction between women, any stereotypical assumptions we may make about the amount and quality of women's conversation.¹³⁴ She does this by using rather derogatory language, 'chit chat' to describe this interaction and by letting us know that this kind of 'talking' makes her sick. Finally she brings us back to an association between such interaction and narrative when she uses the word 'story' to describe the 'mess' on the floor.

¹³⁴ See more on derogatory categorisation of women's speaking in 'Responses to the Question', Appendix Two pplxxvi-lxxxix.

SLAPS HEAD.

Oh no! What am I doing? What am I saying? You see what happens when you take a beginning – an egg for instance – do you hear what you get? Dialogue that's what. Talk, conversation, chit chat, words and more words until you've got verbal diarrhoea until you're sick with it. First there were eggs and then there was mess, followed by salmonella. But I'm not going to clear it up I'm not going to cook up this story because I told you, I don't believe in it anymore.

DOES A DANCE OF LIBERATION AND SLIPS ON THE EGGS AND FALLS.

I believe...I believe....

INSTRUMENTAL VERSION OF SONG, 'I believe (for every drop of rain that falls a flower grows etc.) MOVING TO MUSIC TRIES TO GET UP, SLIPS, SLIDING FLOOR DANCE TO SHOUTS OF:

I believe – in – in the lottery – and....and then? And then? And then nothing, no birth, no death, no heaven, no re-incarnation, no over the rainbow, just... just.....

WIRE SHOPPING TROLLEY ROLLS SLOWLY ON

Shopping? We all believe in Shopping.

KNEELS AT TROLLEY

We believe in prayer within the sacred aisles.

(SINGS IN STYLE OF PRAYER RESPONSES) Oh god please give me bargains. On which to spend my winnings. That I may profit from my greed. (SPEAKS) I believe in spends.

In her rejection of the use of narrative as an ideological form,¹³⁵ which reproduces natural experience, the True Aerialist reminds us that narratives are also, in the words of Judith Roof, 'metaphors of capitalist relations of production'. Roof goes on to expand on the connection between reproduction and production in the following way:

Where in human reproduction male and female come together to produce offspring, in capitalist production capital and labor come together to generate products. Reiterating a similar dynamic – the same dynamic. (Roof, 1996 pxvii)

When the True Aerialist states her belief in the lottery, in supermarkets and shopping, but implies that this is a belief that is equivalent to religious conviction, she is again, in her contradictory way, only replacing one grand narrative with another. She is also simultaneously challenging any categorising of women that identifies them as a domestic source of consumption.

¹³⁵ See also Laura Mulvey's comments on narrative in film p168.

PULLS OUT FEATHER, THROWS UP IN AIR, CHASES IT WITH TROLLEY
How much is that? I'll have it – give it me. I want one.

PULLS OUT SECOND FEATHER

I want two.

PULLS OUT MORE

I want them all, I need them all.

LOOKING IN EMPTY TROLLEY

I must eat after all. A conglomerate must be fed – supplied with the choicest ingredients – no rotten apples – no maggoty veg.

The True Aerialist mocks the growth imperative inherent in descriptions of successful capitalist development.

LIES UNDER TROLLEY WITH MOUTH OPEN

Gimme – gimme – some – I want – gimme.

SMACKS LIPS, LICKS WIRE

I must eat, I must, or.... or die, or wilt and wither, or rot and decay, fester, fall into filth, turn into tilth.

RACES TROLLEY BACKWARDS AND FOREWARDS OVER SELF

Eat, eat, grow, grow, move, shift, no moss, no sweet rotting, no fullness of time fermentation, no rich matter, no mulch, eat, eat, grow, grow, move shift (SCREAMS) Jesus, it's ripping my face off!

PUSHES TROLLEY AWAY, ROLLS INTO BALL

No, no more, leave me, leave me, I want to rest, I want to gather my strength ready to germinate – a sweet curled budding, a milk veined shoot, I want to grow, I want to grow, I want to grow.....organically.

STARTING TO UNFOLD.

One, two, three, four, seventy-six.

GROWTH ARRESTED

Alright, five.

STILL UNABLE TO 'GROW'

Eleven then.

GROWTH CONTINUES TO BE ARRESTED

Eleven? (PAUSE) I don't know why. It's random. Completely.

A creative calculation, a spiritual speculation. But oh eleven please!

(PAUSE) (ANSWERING) Alright, nineteen. (PAUSE) (ANSWERING

DEFIANT) Because it's my birthday, yes the nineteenth and I am growing....up!

SHOOTS UP TO FULL HEIGHT

And my playing...

LOUD CIRCUS MUSIC, ROLLS, SOMERSAULTS, EXECUTES A SERIES OF OVERUSED MIME EXERCISES. PAUSES PANTING

Is getting chronic

RESUMES FRANTIC CIRCUS/MIME ACTIVITIES

In the following speech and action, an invisible force, a potential censor, who seems disturbed by her claim to meaning, punishes our protagonist. In response, the True Aerialist protests that she is unjustly attacked; she disclaims any commitment to content, by denying the possibility of sub-text. She re-affirms her status as a liar, thereby undermining any meaning-based interpretation of her words. In *Against Interpretation* Susan Sontag says:

It is the habit of approaching works of art in order to interpret them that sustains the fancy that there really is such a thing as the content of a work of art. (Sontag, 1987 p5)

When the attacks continue the True Aerialist again resorts to emphasizing her status as a liar. She knows that such a contention effectively denies her authorship

To give a text an author is to impose a limit on that text, to furnish it with a final signified, to close the writing. (Barthes, 1977 p147)

This continued stated commitment to deceit confirms the arbitrary relationship between concepts, images and words. When the True Aerialist adds into this mix her duplicitous relationship with artifice, her position is reinforced and at last she has adequate ammunition to save her from the continued and sustained physical attack.

Inappropriate for someone my age. I'm beginning to wonder what it means.
IS HIT BY AN INVISIBLE FORCE HARD ON THE HEAD. THIS AND
EACH SUBSEQUENT BLOW IS ACCOMPANIED BY A LOUD BANG.
God alive.
HIT AGAIN
Aah!
FALLS TO FLOOR AND IS KICKED
Aah, oh!
SITS UP
What does this mean?
IS HIT WITH TREMENDOUS FORCE. FALLS DOWN
For pity's sake. I didn't really mean it. Not for a moment.
KICKED
Meaning means nothing to me.
KICKED
My content is
KICKED
argh, uncontentious.
CRAWLING
My sub-text is completely
KICKED
ooh, subjugated. I do not mean anything. Try to believe
LIES PRONE
that I lie
FACE SLAPPED
emphatically, that I deceive...
FACE SLAPPED
thematically. I lie...
WAITS FOR BLOW WHICH DOES NOT COME
(RELIEVED) I lie. I lie. It is in my nature.
DUCKS BLOW
No please. I may have nature but look.
HOLDS OUT WINGS
I am also artifice. I didn't grow them. And my play.....
DUCKS
.....ing is serious....objective.
STANDS CAUTIOUSLY WAITING FOR RESPONSE. FLINCHES A
COUPLE OF TIMES BEFORE REGAINING CONFIDENCE AND PUTTING
AWAY WINGS.

Objective. Yes, you can't object to that. The object...
HOLDS OUT CLASPED HANDS TO THE OTHER SIDE
The object as opposed to the subject.
SLAMS CLASPED HANDS ON STOMACH.
As opposed to me. Leave me alone for a minute will you, and
HOLDS OUT CLASPED HANDS TO THE FRONT
take a look at that.

In this deflection of attention from herself to something outside herself
(the object) the True Aerialist is taking up a position in sympathy with Denise
Riley's reservations about self-description,¹³⁶

My self might be considered tautly, as consisting of nothing more
than what it does. No transcendent 'character' need swell like a miasma
over and above its actions: as Aristotle was convinced, it's in my
performance that my truth be found. (Riley, 2000 p26)

She is also making reference to those observations on the representation
of women that concentrate on their objectification and are often cited as giving
rise to women's uneasy relationship with the subject position.

'If the majority of our cultural depictions of women in fiction, poetry,
philosophy, visual art, and religious discourse have colonized female figures,
yet if women writers have (as they must) some measure of force and agency,
this bi-focal subject/object position creates a staggering and fascinating problem
for the woman writer, who is a power in her own work, but an artefact in most
of the traditions of meaning on which she draws.' (DuPlessis, 1990 ppvii-viii)

The True Aerialist chooses her own object; one that she can demonstrate
is physically separate from her. She then claims to be able to establish a
relationship with this object. It is a relationship that perhaps mirrors her own
relationship with her self-image and results in a similar separation of self from

¹³⁶ See also reference to Riley p23.

image: that slippage between self and identity which is common to many women's day to day experience. However, when the audience seem to confirm this loss of identity, of subjectivity, the True Aerialist is thrown into a panic and rashly decides to adopt a character, to use the classic performance strategy of pretence in order to give herself identity.' If I didn't act, I didn't know who I was' (Juliet Stevenson cited in Oddey 2002 p276). With 'characteristic' contrariness the True Aerialist then chooses to represent herself as a stereotypical character, a self-conscious action that perversely reinstates her power.

HOLDS OUT CLASPED HANDS TO THE SIDE

At this

HOLDS OUT CLASPED HANDS TO OTHER SIDE

at that. What does

HOLDS OUT LEFT HAND PALM EXTENDED, POINTS TO IT WITH
RIGHT

that say to you?

POINTING FINGER BENDS AROUND UNTIL IT POINTS AT HER.

Not about me.

USES LEFT HAND TO RE EXTEND PALM OF POINTING HAND
AND CLASPS HANDS AGAIN.

This is independent of me. That isn't mine. I don't own it. (SADLY)

But then I never did.

MELANCHOLY ABSTRACT VIOLIN MUSIC. HOLDS CLASPED HANDS
TO EAR. SWAYS TO MUSIC. LISTENING TO HANDS.

Oh I kidded myself but.... looking back. I can see... well, there was a time
when I truly desired this beautiful object. I was enchanted by its colour –
viridian of deep undergrowth blending into the cerulean blue of a summer
sky. I was obsessed by the exquisite turn on the handle, which rested so
warm and smooth in my hand. I adored it. I felt part of the history of every
person who had ever touched it and I often wept for the integrity of the
artisan who made it. The glaze on this object mirrored my face and blinded
me. I loved it, I loved it... but now... well the object and I no longer have a
relationship....

MUSIC ENDS WITH SCRAPE OF NEEDLE

We are not even friends. This object and I ...

HAND CLAMPS OVER MOUTH. TRIES TO SIGN THE WORDS

Can't communicate SEVERAL TIMES BUT FAILS.

(SPEAKS) Can't communicate.

HOLDS CLASPED HANDS TO EAR, VIOLIN STARTS AGAIN.

We are estranged. It's better that way. I mean what can you say....

EXTENDS ONE PALM AND POINTS TO IT

... to an object like this? Nothing. There is nothing between us any more.

Nothing to say.

CLAPS HANDS

There is nothing there.

EXTENDING BOTH OPEN PALMS TO EITHER SIDE, ASKS AUDIENCE.

Is there? Objectively....From an objective point of view – absolutely nothing
there – eh? Would you agree? (SHOCKED) You would? Now hold on a
minute. I could be lying, I could be pretending. Let's not get too carried
away here. Eh?

OPENS WINGS

There's these – OK so I could never hold a tune, but let's not go straight for the negative scenario. Benefit of the doubt eh? (TOMMY COOPER) Cup – ball, ball – cup. Now you see it, now you don't – don't – don't. You don't see it? You don't see anything?

FALLS TO KNEES

Oh my god! Then you can see I am without object? You perceive my lack of intent?

HEAD IN HANDS

I am stripped naked. Oh horror. I never thought it would come to this.

What am I to do? I must do something, I must be something

JUMPS UP AND STARTS RUNNING BACKWARDS AND FORWARDS

TAKING LITTLE JUMPS AND FLAPPING WINGS

I know, I'll become a desperate character. No that's wrong. My character will become desperate. Is she? Desperate? What the hell? Who the hell?

I don't know.

STOPS

I must think. No I must feel....my character. The desperation in my character.

But I am a character. I am a character. A desperate woman. Oh I am, I am... desperate. I could do anything. I could be anything. I could be... I could be... female? Well obviously, an obvious female, a stereotype, I could be that, easy. Why not? A tart for instance – yes.

TAKES KNICKERS OFF HEAD. RIPS THE CRUTCH. PUTS THEM ON.

LICKS FINGER. ARRANGES EYEBROWS. LICKS FINGER AGAIN, INSERTS IN SPLIT IN KNICKERS.

Oh yes I could pop up a tart.

REMOVES FINGER AND EXAMINES IT, HOLDS IT UP, LIFTS OTHER HAND EXTENDS ALL FINGERS.

An old pro. – "Thirty quid, I'll do you a blow for thirty." – Who's a drug

addict – "Fifty for the full works, front or back." – with a vicious pimp –

"Double it for any S and M." She's innocent really – "Two hundred with trimmings, costume, paraphernalia. You'll like it, I'm pierced throughout."

Vice less in her own completely corrupt way – "Give us two fifty and you get the vid." Yes, I could be a typical tart. I'd make a good stereotype. But

stereo's out of date aint it? Well I bloody hope it is. All those dualities, dichotomies, dialectical binaries – deconstructed – yeah – for good. It's not

technology now it's technologies, it's CD s, it's digital, it's E mail. Fucking, faxing, factions, at a local level that is. Whilst somewhere else, over the

rainbow, outa sight, it's global, megabites, multi sensory, it's millennium, monumental, it's mythic. It's Medea. Oh yes! Oh yes, I could do that, what

she did. I could kill my bloody children, I'd enjoy that. She was desperate – too fucking right. I'm not that desperate, but I think about it sometimes –

when they get on my nerves and if he's playing up. Well her chap played her up proper – Old Jason. Yeah, he was a right bad lad. And she knew. And

she decided.... And if they're all getting me down I think about my knife drawer. I count up the blades – serrated bread knife – meat cleaver. That steel carver with the bone handle. The old ones sharpen up best. Yeah she had intent – Old Medea. She had... she had... but... but I... but... I... but I haven't. I'd just be pretending. Lying again. Pretending to pretend. But to be honest.... (SNIVELS) which I know is a contradiction in terms with me... but sometimes... I just feel... you can stick your cyber culture... your ontological insecurity... I just want... I just wish... sometimes... (CRIES)... all the time... I do... just... (HOWLS) Well I do miss Medea!

LOUD DRAMATIC SYMPHONIC MUSIC (WAGNER, THE MUSIC OF THE VALKYRIES) WOMAN CRIES FOR A TIME.

Toril Moi, describes Hélène Cixous predilection for mythological and religious imagery as signalling an investment in a world that,

like the distant country of fairy tales is perceived as pervasively meaningful, as closure and unity. The mythical or religious discourse presents a universe where all difference, struggle and discord can in the end be satisfactorily resolved. (Moi, 1998 p117)¹³⁷

When the True Aerialist expresses a longing for the mythic, she is returning to a position that allows the possibility of certainty. However, she is also able to admit the level of deceit and pretence she will have to accept when performing Medea, the mythic protagonist in a story that describes a woman's unflinching intent to perform an action which runs counter to all conventional notions of 'the good mother'. The True Aerialist describes the required nature of this performance using another double negative: the phrase 'pretending to pretend'.

¹³⁷ More on myth in commentary on *Tracings* pp271-298.

Wagner was admired by Hitler and has, through this association and his own anti-Semitism, become linked with fascism. The limitations and problems of any association with myth and its accompanying sentiments are illustrated when the True Aerialist's distress is underscored by music from Wagner's Ring Cycle. And the mythic element is again emphasized by the choice of the leitmotif, which accompanies the Valkyries.

I'm sorry, but no character can be completely without emotion.
And I... I... I feel... something?

PAUSE

Psychology? (PERKING UP) Oh I wouldn't go so far as that. I wouldn't
gesture that way.

MAKES EXAGGERATED AND REPEATED GESTURE WHICH SUGGESTS
A PARTICULAR CHARACTER TYPE.

Or that way ANOTHER GESTURE

Or that way ANOTHER GESTURE

The gestures of my personality are more... personal. They reflect my...
selfhood. Self. GESTURE Self. GESTURE Self. GESTURE. Yes, that's me.
POKES CHEST WITH FINGER Self, self, self. I am selfish. Well, it's
inevitable. After all... there's only me, I'm the only one here... up here,
exposed.

Artaud regarded gesture as a pure theatrical language, 'a language of
signs, gestures and attitudes having an ideographic value as they exist in
certain unperverted pantomimes' (Artaud (1938) 1970 p39). And Kristeva
argued that the relationship between the subject, the object and the gesture is
'of an indicative but non-signifying kind' (Kristeva, 1968 p95). The gesture is
primarily an indicator rather than a signifier. In Patrice Pavis's words, it
sketches, out the 'situation-of-utterance' (Pavis, 1982), the communicative
context.

Here the True Aerialist is referring to those performance strategies which
deliver characterisation through physical gesture¹³⁸, those actions that retrieve

¹³⁸ Hilary Robinson is useful here, as she describes Irigaray's reading of the word gesture as associating it with the idea of being in some way performed (whether that performance is the reason for the gesture's being, or whether the performance of the gesture is considered pragmatic or a means to an end [.....] It suggests a space for analysis of what., where and how the performative gestures of women artists are in their practices (Robinson, 2005 p131).

theatrical gesture from a mere illustration of the spoken text and allow it to become the physical embodiment of character or persona. She is using these references to gesture to satirize her own obsession with self, whilst drawing our attention to the fact that this singular, individualistic interpretation of self is a direct consequence of her isolation in this particular performance moment – an isolation that she intimates is partly the fault of her audience, the fault of their viewing.¹³⁹

¹³⁹ See also section 'Body' in 'What is it you wish to speak of?' Appendix Two pplvii-lxix.

POINTS FINGER AT AUDIENCE

To you, to your.... (GETS TEARFUL AGAIN)

MELANCHOLY VIOLIN

I mean if someone else was with me, well, it'd be different. I wouldn't be so lonely for one thing. I wouldn't feel so completely....

MUSIC STOPS, FINGER TURNS ABRUPTLY AND POKES DIRECTLY IN EYE.

FALLS TO KNEES.

Aah! Ah don't...don't mock. For Christ's sake don't mock me. I mean can't you see how.... EXTENDS ARMS, VIOLIN PLAYS. I'm hurt.... wounded. I'm a tragically scarred figure. Lonely, confused, damaged by deceit. How can you laugh? I mean, what do you think this is? Oh god, I wish I could escape.... from this.... from this form... this form....ula.

MUSIC STOPS WITH SCRAPE OF NEEDLE.

Formula? Form – ula. Ula, ula? Sounds like an intimate body part. Ula... just down from the ova. Hot, engorged and covered in feathers. Feathers for flying.

GETS UP, OPENS WINGS, RUNS AND FLAPS WINGS TRYING TO TAKE OFF.

For flying away. I must escape. You must help me. Please.

SOMEONE THROWS A SMALL TIN INTO THE SPACE. THIS IS SEEN FIRSTLY AS AN ATTACK AND THEN CURIOSITY LEADS TO INVESTIGATION.

Escape?

OPENS THE TIN AND REMOVES LARGE REEFER. SMILES BROADLY.

Escape. Yeah, who needs wings. Chill out, hang out, drop out. (HUMS)

Hey Mr. Tambourine man play a song for me, I'm not sleepy and (SINGS WORDS) there is no place I'm going to.

PULLS OUT FEATHER AND TUCKS IN TOBACCO MORE FIRMLY.

STICKS FEATHER INTO HAIR.

Going nowhere, heading back, to just being... happy. Because... happiness just is. Anywhere, anytime, it's complete, it's fulfilling, it's entertaining.

Happiness keeps you fully entertained. Yeah, that's the beauty of happiness – you need nothing else. Except... well maybe a bit of spare cash, yeah, if I won the lottery I reckon I'd really be happy.

PUTS REEFER IN MOUTH, CHECKS POCKETS FOR A LIGHT.

Oh shit! That's typical – you get within a sniff of happiness and you find you just aint got what it takes. I've got no funds, no wherewithal. My capital's incapable, my charisma's crap... I've got not light...no.....no light entertainment value at all.

In a moment of existential angst the True Aerialist comments on the vapidness of personality-focussed populist entertainment strategies. She draws attention to their link with materialism and their restricting self-referential nature, describing this as being at odds with any development of ideas or positive action.

CANNED LAUGHTER. WOMAN STARTS TO LAUGH AND CONTINUES UNTIL HER LAUGHTER BECOMES SOBBING.

Sometimes I really despair (BREAKS REEFER) of happiness.

MELANCHOLY ABSTRACT VIOLIN MUSIC

I think it's not for me, not for the likes of me. I want, I want, I just want – something – to happen. Anything can happen to someone like me. Who has no one to be.... with.... to do.... with. Who hasn't even an object.... of desire.... about which.... Who has not time to be...gin.... or end. I have no chorus, no backing group. Only you.

SIGHS DEEPLY AND MELODRAMATICALLY. THROWS TIN AWAY.

You lot – over there. Watching.... me. Making.... me.... feel.....

SIGHS AGAIN

You're so distant. Why are you so distant? Perhaps if we....

MOVES IN AMONGST AUDIENCE

could get together – it might... we might... make things possible?

Flying for instance. I mean why use wires? When...

SELECTS TWO PEOPLE, LEADS THEM INTO PERFORMANCE SPACE

(would you? And you?.... Please?)

SOME IMPROVISATION MAY BE NECESSARY FROM NOW ON AS

INDICATED BY TEXT IN BRACKETS. ESSENTIAL TEXT IS NOT

BRACKETED

we can....

STARTS TO INSTRUCT 'HELPERS'

(Just stand perfectly still/thank you. Bend knees. Good, good. And two other people.... You'll do, right) Lift – me – up

CLAMBERS ON SHOULDERS

Mind the wings.... don't damage the.....(careful, up, higher, right)

Now let go. Let me fly!

JUMPS. FALLS. GETS UP AND GLARES AT FOUR HELPERS.

See that? Did you see that? Yes well.... so much for.... I should have known, I mean, I mean we're talking flying here, we're talking lift off, I mean, if weight ratio came into it a swan would never get off the ground and as for a pigeon....

LONG PAUSE. SNIVELS A LITTLE. SHOUTS AT RETREATING HELPERS.

But they do – they do fly.

SYNTHESIZED MOOD MUSIC.

Don't they? Don't they? (WAITS FOR AUDIENCE RESPONSE)

I mean we've all seen then haven't we – up there – flying about? Suspended – despite our disbelief. We've seen them, haven't we? Did you say yes?

(WAITS FOR AUDIENCE RESPONSE) Did you say yes? Yes? Let me hear you say yeah.

HOLDS HAND TO EAR. SOUNDTRACK OF CROWD CHEERING.

Yeah? Yeah?

DEAFENING APPLAUSE, CHEERING, SCREAMING.

(SHOUTS) Oh praise the lottery! God bless Supermarkets and all who shop in them!

MUSIC STARTS AND BUILDS (INTRO. TO 'ONLY YOU')

(SEDUCTIVE) Deceit is so delicious. Pretence is pure pleasure. Lies are – oh just loll out your tongue and lick up those lies. Ah believe me, you do believe me, I know you believe me. I can feel you believe me. Oh yes, this is it, this is the moment, this is the place, happiness, togetherness.....who needs a storyline – or an object – there is no crock of gold at the end of the rainbow, only me and you and yes, yes, it's true that....

STARTS TO SING. VERY SLOW TEMPO

Only you can make this change in me.

LIGHTS START TO DIM

For it's true, you are my destiny. When you hold my hand

EXTENDS PALMS, CEREMONIALLY CURVES HAND ROUND

EXTENDING TWO FINGERS, POINTING AT SELF.

I understand

STRIPS OFF OUTER CLOTHING TO REVEAL SILVER BODY SUIT

the magic that you do. You're my dream come true, my one and only you.

HOLDS ARMS UPWARDS AND OUTWARDS IN A CELEBRATORY FASHION

Only you can make this world seem right. Only you can make the darkness light.

HANGING STARS ARE LIT ONE BY ONE.

Only you and you alone can thrill me like you do. You're my dream come true, my one and

LIGHTS ARE ALMOST DOWN. A MOON IS LOWERED ON A WIRE AND WOMAN HOOKS HERSELF UP, OPENS HER WINGS AND FLIES AWAY.

LIGHTS DOWN. VOICE IN DISTANCE SINGS.

.....Oh oh only you!

In the finale it would seem that, despite denying them any opportunity to believe in her, the True Aerialist is reliant on her audience's faith in her. She seems to need this affirmation in order to achieve flight. Flight, in its turn, representing both a release or escape from a situation where she is constantly

surveyed and also some realised act of performance. In order to achieve this flight the True Aerialist also seems to need to arrive at another level of spectacle and transformation. This is partly achieved through the song lyrics, which speak of destiny, dreams, magic and sexual fantasies, all encoded in the language of popular romanticism. Transformation and spectacle is also delivered by means of the iconic identity achieved when the silver suit is revealed. It is also contained in the moon, an object embedded with female symbolism. These factors combine to deliver successful levitation and despite her earlier lack of confidence, True Aerialist is now able to achieve her desire.

At the last moment, however, the whole inference that the True Aerialist is reliant on the support of her audience is undercut by a gesture. When the True Aerialist stops holding out her hands to the audience and turns her fingers and points them towards herself, the action changes from one which might suggest a pleading request, to a re-affirmation of the self.

Elam describes gestures, which contradict simultaneous linguistic utterances (in this case the text of the song), as a common source of comic effect. He goes on to confirm that 'Cooperation between the two modes of 'discourse', as between performance codes in general, is a complex dialectic rather than a matter of automatic reciprocal confirmation' (Elam, 1987 p78).

The True Aerialist uses this gestural strategy to demonstrate the complex relationship, which exists between herself and her audience. The action is one that mirrors, reflects, demonstrates and embodies some of the difficulties experienced by any single female live performer.

Afterword

The female monologue is an important form for the reasons cited in my preface to this section. It is a forum for the autobiographical possibility of 'talking to oneself' in a process which monopolises, does not allow dialogue or conversation, but does all the talking, holding forth without the possibility of interruption. In the formation of the question 'What is it you wish to speak of?' I constructed that possibility for others; in the form of *The True Aerialist* I extend this opportunity to myself. And when, through her claim to be a liar, the True Aerialist denies any possibility of being held to account for any of her statements or actions, I also simultaneously avail myself of that freedom. I use all means at my disposal as a dramatist, my experience of writing for performance and of physical theatre to speak of those questions indicated in *Reckless Repartee*.

What I have understood from this process makes reference to what Peggy Phelan describes in *Unmarked* as that characteristic elision of image and identity which women experience all the time (Phelan, 1993). Writing *The True Aerialist* and devising its commentary has taught me something about elision, a word that I often replace with 'slippage' and when I do I imagine two plates of matter constantly passing over each other, producing some intermixed, ground-down debris through the pressure and movement. In describing this sense of slippage between the self as perceived, or performed, or externally inscribed, and another, more present self, I find some reference to Descartes' notion of

arriving at the subject by applying systematic doubt to everything about which the mind cannot be absolutely certain. The True Aerialist does this and we witness her process of trying to discover what remains. Or rather, using her mode of punning, I should say we discover 'the remains' – that debris described above but transformed by the possibilities of performance.

The prose version of this script, without stage directions, was published in *Feminist Review*¹⁴⁰ and, when I read it in this form, its velocity struck me. It was a headlong verbal race, a sprint, a high-spirited dash. I was almost intimidated by its excess, by the force of its playful, punning language, by the confidence of my protagonist. This was a discovery that has confirmed my interest in notions of appropriate or inappropriate use of language and the power of transgression. It has also provoked questions about my role as author and my capabilities as a commentator on my own production. These are questions that continue to run throughout all sections of this thesis, though admittedly at a more discursive and measured pace than the True Aerialist's headlong dash.

¹⁴⁰ *Feminist Review*, issue 84 (October 2006) included in Appendix Three ppcxv-cxxvi.

Tracings

This section opens with *Tracings* a full-length script for live performance. The play is then followed by two separate commentaries. The first, 'Myth', uses the text as the basis for a discussion of the prevalent use of myth by many female writers. The second section, 'Beginning Again', looks at aspects of the composition of *Tracings* in more detail, concentrating on how its repetitive, circular, revisiting, retracing form serves the overall preoccupations of the play.

TRACINGS

A PLAY IN SEVEN MOVEMENTS

Cast

Rodin

Gwen John

Rilke

Vera Oumancoff

In 1905 in Paris the sculptor Rodin employed the painter Gwen John
(sister of Augustus) to sit for him.

At the same time he engaged the poet Rilke to act as his secretary.

TRACINGS joins the three of them in Rodin's studio
where Gwen poses, Rodin sculpts and Rilke writes his poem
'Orpheus. Eurydice. Hermes'.

As Rilke writes, Gwen identifies each of them with one of the gods in the poem.

She is Eurydice.

Rilke is Hermes.

Rodin is Orpheus.

As the writing of the poem progresses so Gwen retraces her traumatic
relationship with Rodin before embarking on her final passion for Vera
Oumacoff.

RODIN'S STUDIO

A MIRROR AND A SIX FOOT WOODEN CROSS (UPSIDE DOWN)
RODIN IS ADDING CLAY TO A SMALL CLAY MAQUETTE ON A STAND, HE
CONCENTRATES AND BREATHES HEAVILY. GWEN POSES HALF NUDE ON A
RAISED PLINTH, A SHEET DRAPED AROUND HER HIPS. TO ONE SIDE AT A
DESK SITS RILKE, IMMACULATELY DRESSED, WRITING WITH PEN AND INK.
RODIN TAKES A MOUTHFUL OF WATER FROM A BOWL AT HIS SIDE AND SPITS
IT AT THE CLAY FIGURE. HIS AIM IS INACCURATE AND THE WATER HITS
GWEN AND SPATTERS RILKE'S LETTER. GWEN GASPS AND RILKE THROWS
DOWN HIS PEN IN DISGUST. RODIN CONTINUES TO WORK. SUDDENLY HE
APPROACHES GWEN AND LIES HIS HEAD ON HER STOMACH. SHE
COLLAPSES DOWNWARD AND CRADLES HIS HEAD RUBBING HER OWN FACE
FIERCELY, CATLIKE AGAINST HIS HAIR. HE WAITS IMPASSIVELY FOR HER TO
STOP AND WHEN SHE DOES HE MOVES BACK TO HIS MODELLING.
CONCENTRATION AND HEAVY BREATHING ARE RESUMED.

RILKE LIFTING HIS WRITING AND HOLDING IT UPRIGHT
Look - tears. Can you see them? Look at them trickling through my
words.

RODIN My spit.

RILKE Tears.

RODIN I spat on your words.

RILKE Tears like tidal waves of destruction.

RODIN I was wetting the clay.

RILKE READS ALOUD. AS HE SPEAKS GWEN GETS DOWN FROM THE PLINTH
AND APPROACHES HIM, SHE STANDS AND LISTENS.

RILKE *That was the strange unfathomed mine of souls.
And they, like silent veins of silver ore,
were winding through its darkness.*

RODIN Why don't you stop writing that and go home to your wife?

RILKE I'm writing it for her.

RODIN Go home, get into bed with her, put your hands on her breasts.

GWEN TAKES RILKE'S HANDS AND PLACES THEM ON HER BREASTS.

GWEN Who is winding through the darkness?

RILKE TAKING HIS HANDS FROM HER BREASTS AND COVERING HIS EYES Eurydice and Hermes.

RODIN What about Orpheus?

RILKE *The slender husband first, in his blue mantle,
gazing in dumb impatience straight before him.
His steps devoured the way in mighty chunks
they did not pause to chew....*

RODIN Go on, go on!

GWEN No don't. I know what's going to happen - Orpheus is going to turn and then Eurydice will have to go back into the darkness. He loses faith and she's condemned to suffer. It's too familiar.

RODIN All poetry seems familiar - that's part of its charm.

RILKE Poetry is not charming.

RODIN What is it then?

RILKE Suffering.

RODIN Oh the suffering of artists - how they love it!

GWEN APPROACHES RODIN

GWEN You and I are Orpheus and Eurydice.

RILKE And I am Hermes your messenger. WAVES PAPER I write your letters.

RODIN TO GWEN What! Are you saying I condemned you to the darkness?

GWEN Yes.

RODIN Are you saying *I* made you suffer?

GWEN Of course.

RODIN That's a lie, your suffering has nothing to do with me. You always suffered; you made a point of it.

GWEN Not always, there was a time...If Orpheus could go back to that moment of turning...If he could revisit that moment. He must have wanted to - longed to.... I want to.

RODIN SPITS AT THE CLAY
Oh the sentiment of artists - the nostalgia they have for themselves!

RILKE READING
*But there were rocks
 And ghostly forests. Bridges over voidness,
 and that immense, grey, unreflecting pool
 that hung above its so far distant bed
 like a grey rainy sky above a landscape.*

GWEN That's the landscape of the underworld - a dark landscape of suffering. I want to go back before that. To be above ground in a world of sun bleached grasses and eye splitting skies. I want to be with Dorelia again on those rough roads, our easels beating the backs of our legs, our knapsacks straining with paints and brushes and bottles of woody red wine - she and I - walking to Rome.

RODIN To Rome! To Rome! LAUGHS HEARTILY Captivating!

GWEN She was.

RODIN It appeals to me. I'm susceptible to these stories of young women seduced by each other's sensuality!

GWEN Dorelia and I.

RODIN Walking to Rome. LAUGHS AGAIN.

GWEN Shall we sleep by the river Dorelia? On the slanting stones under the overhanging trees? Shall we my darling girl?

RODIN Your darling girl and a beauty too I heard.

GWEN We lie down and try to sleep, but the cold is frightful - the stones are like ice. Dorelia and I hold each other to keep warm. Dorelia and I.

RODIN You and Dorelia. LAUGHS QUIETLY.

GWEN HOLDING OUT ARM
 Towards the wrist the forearm becomes gradually thinner and the bones project more and more between the muscles and the tendons until there's only skin covering bone.

I try to understand and then show it. I draw it once - I make the line under the wrist curve like a swan's neck - but my mark is too broad. I try again, but this time the wrist looks too frail and thin - a third attempt - and there it is - delicacy and strength.

Then I turn.... and look at Dorelia. The line of her neck echoes the line on my paper. It's just as perfect and just as beautiful.

RODIN Embarrassingly beautiful.
 GWEN I want...
 RODIN to bite it?
 RODIN SPITS AGAIN AT THE CLAY. GWEN AND RILKE FLINCH.
 GWEN No!
 RODIN Why not? To bite into it - like into a fresh peach.
 GWEN I want to hold the moment, I want it to go on.
 RODIN You and Dorelia. HE LAUGHS QUIETLY. Delicious. Of course I
 wanted to meet you. Who wouldn't? A young painter, fresh from her
 lover's embrace.
 GWEN From Dorelia's white arms.
 RODIN The arms of your brother's mistress!
 GWEN My mouth still wet from her kisses.
 RODIN I couldn't wait to meet such a young adventuress. Can you blame me?
 What man...?
 RILKE INTERRUPTING Or woman....
 RODIN Who wouldn't?
 GWEN I cover the paint with glazes - one two three layers – until the surface
 begins to glow - like lamplight - and Dorelia's face takes on this
 luminous quality. She does have that - an inner glow - a sort of serenity.
 RODIN You painted her
 GWEN She was a perfect model
 RODIN You painted her and so there is no need to go back.
 RILKE No need at all.
 GWEN But that moment when everything is new, the time before the moment
 of turning...
 RODIN Gone forever, its time to work. I'm paying you to work for me.
 RILKE Perhaps if you paid a bit more.

GWEN a time when everything is possible - there was another moment like that...

RODIN The light's going, I need my model.

GWEN TO RODIN.... the moment when we first met. Do you remember?

RODIN Yes, of course.

RILKE Really? You remember?

GWEN I was happy then too...I forgot my suffering....

RODIN You forgot Dorelia.

GWEN Yes, I did.

RODIN You let your brother have her.

GWEN I wanted you by then.

RILKE You poor child.

GWEN Let's go back to that moment, let's meet again.

RODIN And if we do?

GWEN Perhaps Eurydice will be saved. Perhaps she will be in the sunlight forever.

LIGHTING CHANGE. GWEN BEGINS TO DRESS AND RILKE TAKES OUT A FRESH SHEET OF PAPER. RODIN SPITS VICIOUSLY AT THE CLAY.

FIRST MOVEMENT

RILKE WRITING AND READING Monsieur Rodin accepts your commission for the statue of Whistler's muse. One of Whistler's old pupils...

GWEN Gwen John.

RILKE She studied with him in London and Paris and has agreed to pose.

RODIN No! No! Are you mad?

RILKE That *is* one of my greatest fears.

RODIN Agree terms first, before we accept.

RILKE RIPPING UP THE LETTER I'm a poet. I don't agree terms.

RODIN You agreed to work for me - as my secretary - you accepted the pay.

GWEN So did I - one franc an hour.

RODIN STOPS MODELLING, SPITS ON HIS HAND WIPES IT ON HIS CLOTHING AND EXTENDS IT TOWARDS GWEN.

RODIN Come in then mademoiselle, please come in.

GWEN EXAMINING RODIN'S HAND Now we're at the first moment?

RODIN The point of no return.

GWEN Once I felt this hand and the clay caked on it like dried blood. A workman's hand, fingers blunt....

RODIN Yours is too cold - like a dead mouse. Come in, come in and warm yourself.

RODIN PULLS A TENTATIVE GWEN INTO THE CENTRE OF THE STUDIO.

RILKE WRITING AND READING
*And between meadows, soft and full of patience,
appeared the pale strip of the single pathway
like a long line of linen laid to bleach.*

And on this single pathway they approached.
CONTINUES WRITING

RODIN And I assess the slope of her stomach, the angle of her neck.

GWEN While I'm appalled by these.... INDICATES CLAY MODELS OF WOMEN IN VARIOUS DISTORTED POSES.... these....

RODIN My work.

GWEN these women caught.

RODIN Yes...yes, I've caught them. I've captured the slope of their stomach, the angle of their neck. I've taken hold of them... here... like this.

PUTS HIS HAND ON ONE OF THE CLAY MODELS SEIZES HOLD OF PART OF IT AND CRUSHES IT IN HIS FIST.

GWEN Grotesquely held.

RODIN GENEROUSLY SLAPPING THE CLAY BACK INTO SHAPE
Warmly held. Vigorously held. You're shivering, come closer to the fire.

GWEN They look like tangled roots.

RILKE READING *...Between roots welled up the blood that flows onto mankind,*

GWEN This room is like a vision of hell. Are you the devil?
Do you want me to burn?

RODIN I want you to get warm. Give me your other hand.

RILKE READING.... *the blood that flows on to mankind,*

GWEN Your hands are warming my blood, but...INDICATES WOMEN *they* chill it. Look at them writhing in pain, they look in agony.

RODIN In ecstasy. That's what turns their hips and their stomachs and their heads.

GWEN I don't understand.

RODIN Ah.... so how can I explain? ...Rilke you tell her...you know.

RILKE WRITING AND READING *Once I saw the torso of a figure with the head of another pressed against it, with the arm of a third stuck to its side as if an unspeakable storm, an unparalleled destruction has passed over this work.*

RODIN Ecstasy - tell her about ecstasy.

RILKE It's a letter to my wife - I'm describing my first visit to your villa.

READING *And yet each of these bits is of such an eminent striking unity, so possible by itself that one forgets they are only parts of different bodies that cling to each other so passionately. One feels suddenly that it is the business of the artist to create these new relationships, new unities, greater, more logical, more eternal. And this wealth, this endless, continual invention, this poise, purity and vehemence of expression, this inexhaustibleness this youth, this still having something, still having the best to say...this is without parallel in the history of men...*

GWEN Terrifying.

RODIN Ecstatic.

RILKE READING *There are hundreds and hundreds of them there, no one piece like another - each a feeling, each a bit of love, devotion, kindness and searching.*

GWEN So why do I find them so frightening? Why do I want to run away, back to.... back to.... to what? To where? England? No, never. I want to be an artist, so I must stay in Paris.

RODIN And earn your living. One franc an hour. Three days a week.
LAUGHS You must be brave. Are you warm now?

GWEN My hands are aching with the heat.

RODIN LETS HER HANDS GO AND RETURNS TO THE MAQUETTE WHERE HE
TWISTS OFF A HUNK OF CLAY

RODIN Pleasure and pain eh? SPITS AT THE CLAY

RILKE LEAPING UP FROM HIS DESK. This is intolerable - your spit
- my letter is quite spoilt and so is my poem.

RODIN Then you will have to write it again. Eurydice will have to go back into
the underworld.

RILKE Orpheus will have to restring his lyre.

GWEN TO RODIN And we can have our moment again? That first moment of
meeting when everything is still in the future. When everything can be
done differently. When Orpheus can decide not to turn.

RODIN When we can try again with hindsight? It's impossible.

GWEN APPROACHES HIM AND LAYS HER HEAD ON THE BACK OF HIS NECK.

GWEN When we were younger.

RODIN Younger, ah yes - a temptation hard to resist - to be young and vigorous again - to have the strength in my hands and arms - to be driven to act on my desires - to have desires - to be young again ... LEADS GWEN TO RILKE Your poem - again.

RILKE But my letter to my to my wife...

RODIN Go down into the underworld - take Eurydice's hand - start to lead her.

RILKE SIGHS - TAKES A FRESH SHEET OF PAPER AND BEGINS TO WRITE.

SECOND MOVEMENT

RILKE READING

*That was the strange unfathomed mine of souls.
And they, like silent veins of silver ore,
were winding through its darkness.*

RILKE CONTINUES TO WRITE. RODIN CONTINUES WORKING ON HIS MAQUETTE THEN STOPS, SPITS ON HIS HAND WIPES IT AND EXTENDS IT TOWARDS GWEN.

RODIN Come in then mademoiselle please - come in and let me look at you.

RILKE No spitting, I insist, if you spit again...

RODIN Only the messenger remember - don't get above yourself.
Just get on and write.

RILKE, ANGRY, TOSSES THE POEM TO ONE SIDE AND STARTS ON A NEW SHEET OF PAPER

RODIN Come in, come in mademoiselle, don't be shy. Go on Rilke.

RILKE WRITING AND READING *Then there are tables, model stands, chests of drawers.... completely covered with little figures - golden-brown and yellow-ochre baked clay. Arms no bigger than my little finger, but filled with a life that makes one's heart pound. Hands one can cover with a ten-pfennig piece and yet filled with an abundance of wisdom...as if a giant had made them immeasurably big; - so this man makes them to his proportions. He is so great....*

RODIN No, no, not your letter - the poem, the poem.

RILKE But I want to go back too, I want to revisit *my* first moment, at your villa, I want to remember why I left my wife and child, why I sacrificed them to come here and sit at the feet of 'the great sculptor Rodin.'

RODIN 'The great sculptor Rodin.' LAUGHS Why not? If we're revisiting our past then we can't deny you, but please try and keep your emotions under control. Should he cry mademoiselle, don't let it concern you too much. He's a poet, he has sensibilities and they overwhelm him sometimes.

RILKE You make me sound like a weak fool, but my emotions are my strength - I dare to feel them - I have that courage. I feel everything with my whole self, I never spare myself - no corner of my being. I feel without resistance, absorbing emotions, letting them exist in me simply and ardently, like the earth exists - letting them wash up against me,

pounding my body and mind like the sea pounds against the shore -
pounding and pounding until...

RODIN You see! Do you see what I mean?

GWEN I think I understand what he's trying to say.

RODIN Oh do you indeed? Well perhaps you too have *sensibilités*?

GWEN People have called me over sensitive.

RODIN But is that the same? Your hand is trembling like a frightened mouse.

GWEN I'm not frightened.

RODIN Of course not - just sensitive.

RILKE WRITING AND READING *But it is fearfully taxing- in the first place because of the quantity of work, secondly, because everything is white; one goes about among the many dazzling plaster casts in the very bright pavilion as through snow. My eyes are hurting me... my hands too.... Forgive this smudged letter. You can surely read it. I had to write down for you just quickly all that I have lived today. It is important. Farewell, my dear! Dear and good one. I am glad that there is so much greatness and that we have found our way to it through the wide dismayed world. The two of us. Kiss our little Ruth with my kisses.*

GWEN Why have you left them when you love them so much?

RODIN Because he loves poetry best, his wife comes second
and as for his child....

RILKE No, this is outrageous, it was a terrible choice yes, but I had no hesitation. Ordinary life - the domestic surface is death to me - there's no art there - I had to leave it behind. My spirit wouldn't be quiet until it had been given the freedom to.....

RODIN INTERRUPTING Freedom! Is that it? Is that what you're after?
Not love then? - freedom.

RILKE Art.

RODIN Oh art!

GWEN I loved someone once...

RILKE Dorelia?

GWEN ...but not any more....

RODIN There now, even a girl like you has loved and lost,
 but never mind you're young - plenty of time to try again.

GWEN But I won't - I devote myself to my painting now.

RODIN Really? And is your talent so great that it can bear the weight
 of your sacrifice?

RILKE Don't ask her that. How can you ask her that? It's too cruel.

RODIN Perhaps so, but I believe every artist should ask himself that
 question everyday.

RILKE Why? Only *they* can tell us and maybe *they* won't know
 until.... until we're dead - *we* may never know.

RODIN Good thing too. Now shut up. All this talk of death - you're frightening
 my new model - she's young and sensitive and easily disturbed.
 TO GWEN But really, there's no reason to be nervous, no reason at all. I
 will tell you what to do and you will do it if you wish to.
 And that's all there is to it. First you must stand up here.
 LEADS GWEN TO THE PLINTH WHERE SHE STANDS
 Why so stiff? You're not made of bronze or stone, you're soft flesh and
 warm blood and even when you're still you're full of life and that's
 what I want to see. So just lift your head. That's better, put your hand
 out, no, no, in front of you as if you're receiving something. Just so, yes.
 And then the other hand to the other side and down. Good, now look
 from one hand to the other. Then the first hand, and back again. It's a
 dance you see. You're dancing my little one even though your feet are
 not moving yet. Now come down and stand here in front of me and do
 it again.

GWEN DOES SO

RODIN Rilke get up, come here. Put your hands in hers.

RILKE DOES SO AND BEGINS A SLOW BUT LIGHT DANCE WITH GWEN.

RODIN He's light on his feet isn't he mademoiselle? So graceful and full of
 rhythm. It's because he's a poet of course. They have a feel for the
 tripping beat, the music of the word. La daa da daa daa. That's it,
 around again.

RILKE MOVES HIS HAND TO HER WAIST AND THEY BEGIN TO DANCE MORE
 CLOSELY AND MORE QUICKLY. RODIN PUTS A DANCE RECORD ON A WIND
 UP GRAMOPHONE

RODIN He's entranced, he's set free by your youth, by your virginity, by your inaccessible chastity and innocence. Dance Rilke, dance with her, hold her, touch her.

RILKE STEPS BACK SHOCKED.

RODIN But she's so young and virginal? How can she harm you, how can she tempt you? Dance with her, dance with her.

RODIN LAUGHS. RILKE APPROACHES GWEN AGAIN AND THEY DANCE, WHIRLING FASTER AND FASTER.

RILKE I sacrificed so much, so much, Oh my dearest Clara, my beloved Ruth.

RODIN Lead her Rilke.

RILKE Oh my darlings, how I miss you.

RODIN Show her the way. Dance out of the ordinary, dance far from the everyday.

RILKE From the darkness into the light, let me lead you into the light.

RODIN LAUGHING It is Hermes calling to Eurydice.

RILKE *the god of faring and of distant message,
the travelling-hood over his shining eyes,
the slender wand held out before his body,
the wings around his ankles lightly beating,
and in his left hand, as entrusted, she.*

GWEN Me, yes me!

RILKE *She, so beloved...*

GWEN So beloved, so beloved!

RILKE *....that from a single lyre
more mourning rose than from all women-mourners,
- that, a whole world of mourning rose, wherein
all things were once more present: wood and vale
and road and hamlet, field and stream and beast, -
and that around this world of mourning turned,
even as around the other earth, a sun
and a whole silent heaven full of stars,
a heaven of mourning with disfigured stars: -
she, so beloved.*

RODIN Enjoying yourself Gwen?

GWEN Yes, yes.

RODIN Not too fast for you?

GWEN I could go faster.

RODIN Be careful

GWEN I don't want to.

RODIN You've been in the dark for a long time.

GWEN And it's so wonderful to be above ground.

RODIN But sudden exposure to brilliant light can blind.

RILKE Or it can burn. And we become disfigured.

RODIN Disfigured stars.

RILKE Who have to hide their ugliness and their suffering.

RILKE COLLAPSES

RODIN KICKING HIM GENTLY So much for your guide out of the
underworld. Hermes' wings seem to be broken.

GWEN This isn't how it should be.

RODIN You wanted to go back...again.

GWEN But it wasn't like this.

RODIN For you - your memories are different to mine.

GWEN I remember what happened.

RODIN Do you? I think we interpret our dreams and call them memories.

GWEN Are you quoting Freud?

RODIN No I'm anticipating.

GWEN My retracing?

RODIN Yes, perhaps that *is* what we're doing - retracing - come over here into
the light, look at this. HOLDS UP PAPER

GWEN A tracing.

RODIN Of a drawing I did yesterday.

GWEN A drawing of me.

RODIN Look - can you see here - when a line is copied it becomes simplified.
When a line is copied we're left with what's essential, what's necessary.

GWEN What's true.

RODIN True? Truths are like memories - we all have our own.

GWEN I want to show you mine. LIFTING RILKE Help me.

SHE AND RODIN LIFT RILKE AND GUIDE HIM BACK TO THE DESK. HE
COLLAPSES OVER HIS WRITING. HE IS CRYING. GWEN SHAKES HIM.
RILKE LIFTS HIS HEAD AND HOLDS UP WRITING.

RILKE Look - tears - can you see them? Look at them trickling through my
words. Tears like tidal waves of destruction.

GWEN You can still read it.

RILKE Again?

GWEN Again. TO RODIN Younger again.

RODIN SPITS AT HIS MAQUETTE, RILKE GASPS. GWEN STANDS NEXT TO
RILKE AS EARLIER STRAIGHTENING HER CLOTHES.

THIRD MOVEMENT

RILKE SIGHS - TAKES A FRESH SHEET AND BEGINS TO WRITE.

RILKE READS

*That was the strange unfathomed mine of souls.
And they, like silent veins of silver ore,
were winding through its darkness.*

RILKE CONTINUES TO WRITE. RODIN STOPS WORK, SPITS ON HIS HAND
WIPES IT AND EXTENDS IT TOWARDS GWEN.

RODIN Come in then mademoiselle please – come in and let me look at you.
Why you're shivering. TAKES A LARGE DUSTSHEET OFF A STOVE
Let's sit here by the stove and get warm.

RODIN BRINGS TWO CHAIRS AND THEY SIT. RILKE WRITES.

RILKE READING *Yesterday at about three o'clock I was at Rodin's for the first time.
He had a model, a young woman. Had a little plaster object in his hand on
which he was scraping about. He simply quit work, offered me a chair and we
talked. He was kind and gentle and it seemed to me that I always knew him.*

RODIN TO GWEN There you see, now we're like two friends sitting round the
fire. Give me your hand. It's so cold! And now you see we're such
friends that we hold hands together. Such friends that I warm them like
this.... BLOWS THEN RUBS and like that KISSES and that.... there... Are
you warmer now? Good, good. Now turn your face to the light. Ah
yes. You're very young mademoiselle.

GWEN I'm twenty-eight.

RODIN You look much younger. You have an innocent face and yet....
Lean forwards a little - why do you sit like that? So upright -
like a good child waiting....for what? What is about to happen
to you I wonder? Ah, a smile - I've made you laugh and now
you look....less innocent. LAUGHS. And if I can make you
laugh so soon - we are still very new friends after all -
then perhaps - yes, I think so - I have this feeling Mademoiselle
that we may become good friends. And do you know why?
Because we feel the same about things - important things. I think the
same things make us happy? Yes? You think so too?

RILKE WRITING AND READING *A head of a young woman with a wonderful
forehead, clear, delightful, bright and simple; and deep down in the stone, a
hand emerges which protects from the brightness the eyes of one who is
awakening.*

RODIN TO GWEN So tell me then, what does make you happy my friend?
 GWEN: Oh nothing really.
 RODIN: Just simple things?
 GWEN: Yes, simple things.
 RODIN: Like those flowers that grow in the cracks of walls?
 GWEN: They struggle so hard to bloom.
 RODIN: And the trees that shade the paths of the Luxembourg gardens?
 GWEN: I've slept under the trees in the Luxembourg gardens.
 RODIN: Have you? Have you indeed? I might have guessed.
 GWEN: They are such fine, big trees.
 RODIN: Fine trees and full of character.
 RILKE WRITING AND READING *I found him smaller, and yet more powerful, more kindly and more noble. And his mouth has a speech whose ring is good, intimate and full of youth, so also is his laugh, that embarrassed and at the same time joyful laugh of a child that has been given lovely presents. We spoke of many things.*
 GWEN: The trees in the Bois du Boulogne....
 RODIN: Are of course, much more to your taste.
 GWEN: They're wilder, more natural.
 RODIN: More natural, I knew it. You love simple, natural things but if they're wild too...well...that's more exciting isn't it? And you can't resist... perhaps... the thought, just the chance that... at any moment....
 GWEN: The wind was so wild the other night. I could see the tossing trees from my window; I could hear the branches breaking.
 RODIN Your window was open? Weren't you afraid? Didn't you close it?
 GWEN No, I left it open for my cat - she's half wild you see....
 RILKE WRITING AND READING *In his studio he has a tiny plaster cast of a tiger which he values very highly. C'est beau, c'est tout. There is in this animal the same kind of aliveness in the modelling as you see in his work - a hundred thousand places that are all alive- the prowling stride is intensified to the*

highest degree and the powerful downward tread of the broad paws and at the same time that caution in which all strength is wrapped - that noiselessness.

RODIN: A wild cat? Does she scratch?

GWEN: Sometimes, if I keep her shut in.

RODIN: Now, why should you do that?

GWEN: Because I love to look at her.

RODIN: She's pretty then?

GWEN: She's beautiful and mysterious and....

RODIN: Your friend. Your little wild cat is a friend, like me.
You feel natural together.

GWEN: Yes, we do.

RODIN: As natural as you feel with me?

GWEN: It's true, I do feel natural with you.

RILKE WRITING AND READING *He is very dear to me.
That I knew at once.*

GWEN STANDS AND RILKE APPROACHES RODIN AND THEY CARESS HIM AND
TAKE OFF HIS UPPER GARMENTS

GWEN So dear and kind.

RILKE Such tenderness in a man.

GWEN Unconditional love.

RILKE Sweet affection.

GWEN Warmth and security.

RILKE Care and solicitude.

GWEN Fatherly and yet.... my father...and yet...

RILKE I feel blessed by a god.

GWEN TAKES RODIN'S HAND AND LEADS HIM ONTO THE PLINTH WHERE HE
STANDS MOTIONLESS LIKE A STATUE.

GWEN My hand in his feels safe, kept in trust, it feels secure and strong as if nothing could ever slip through my fingers again.

RODIN PUSHES THEM BOTH AWAY GETS DOWN FROM THE PLINTH AND GETS DRESSED

RODIN Yes this is how it was - two needy children - two damaged souls - two poor physical specimens.

GWEN But I was fatter than I looked with my clothes on and my legs were sturdy. You admired my shoulders and my neck particularly.

RILKE And I was celebrated for my eyes - hooded, brooding pensive.

RODIN But could you, either of you, fuck?

RILKE Clara and I... our child Ruth.

RODIN Procreation - animals do that - I'm not talking about making children. You know what I mean, or do you?

RILKE READING
*But hand in hand now with that god she walked,
her steps encircled by the clinging grave-clothes,
uncertain, gentle, and without impatience.
Wrapt in herself, like one whose time is near,
she thought not of the man who went before them,
nor of the road ascending into life.
Wrapt in herself she wandered. And her deadness
was filling her like fullness.*

GWEN Her deadness was filling her like fullness.... what are you saying Rilke? What's happened to Eurydice?

RILKE She's found some grace in her life of darkness and denial, she....

RODIN No, no Gwen. Don't listen. Don't listen to him. Enough of these first moments, the journey is begun, Eurydice is on her way into the light. She has only to keep coming on. Keep coming on my little one. Come here to me. Touch me. Feel my skin. Smell my sweat. It's different to Dorelia's but ah just smell it. Here take my hand again. Put your fingertips onto mine. Stroke my palm. Dig your nails into it. Kiss it, lick it. What does it taste like?

GWEN It tastes of clay.

RODIN Good, good, dry bitterness on your tongue, turning to thickness in your mouth. And underneath?

GWEN Underneath? The taste of your skin.

RODIN How does it taste?

GWEN Salt and soap and.....

RODIN On the back here...?

GWEN Rough hair.

RODIN You lick like a cat. Like one of your cats..

RILKE HAS BEEN SIFTING PAPER ON HIS DESK. NOW HE LIFTS A PAGE AND READS IT

RILKE *It's the character of the surfaces, more or less in contrast to the contour, that which fills out all the contours. It is the law and the relationship of these surfaces....*

RODIN Shut up. Stop your talking, we're feeling here. We're knowing our bodies. Feeling is what you do with your fingers. Feeling is pressing and pinching and slapping. Feeling is mouth to mouth and when you bite it hurts you ...or someone else. Feeling is when your blood flows and you see it wasted on the floor.

RILKE HORRIFIED You see my blood?

RODIN WEARY No, no, not yet anyway. Alright, be quiet and write if that's all you can do. If that's the only way - and perhaps you're right, it is a good way - work - work - yes, that's the thing - the only real thing - I'm a peasant, an artisan - a maker. I have everything I need here in my hands. RIPS OFF LUMPS OF CLAY The clay, the earth, the raw material waiting for me to press it into shape, for me to put my imprint - my mark.

HE BEGINS WORK IN EARNEST. GWEN GETS UP ONTO THE PLINTH AND, AS SHE SPEAKS THE FOLLOWING, REMOVES HER UPPER GARMENTS.

GWEN And as you tear the clay I almost feel as if you break off lumps of my flesh. I feel you working my nature, reworking my nature, moulding me, remoulding me.

AS SHE SPEAKS RILKE BEGINS TO DANCE ON HIS OWN THE SAME DANCE HE AND GWEN PERFORMED EARLIER. AS HE DOES SO HE CALLS OUT.

RILKE Clara, Clara, my darling, my angel, my sweet wife, mother of my child, maker of life, keeper of my soul.

RODIN SUDDENLY APPROACHES GWEN AND LIES HIS HEAD ON HER STOMACH. SHE COLLAPSES DOWNWARDS AND CRADLES HIS HEAD RUBBING HER OWN FACE FIERCELY CATLIKE AGAINST HIS HAIR AS IN OPENING SEQUENCE. THIS TIME HE REACHES UP AND THEY MOVE INTO AN EMBRACE WHICH MIRRORS THAT OF 'THE KISS' RODIN'S SCULPTURE (SLIDE) THEY HOLD THIS POSE AND THEN RODIN GETS ON HIS KNEES AND PUTS HIS HEAD IN GWEN'S LAP.

GWEN Full as a fruit with sweetness and darkness. I have opened to you.
I'm the softest clay - any touch marks me. I'm forming differently.

RODIN SITTING BACK But I still fuck the same. An itch I have to scratch. An
ache I want to relieve. Power to exercise LAUGHS A muscle to flex
while I still can. While I'm young enough. Why not? You want it.

GWENPUTTING HIS HANDS ON HER BREASTS I want it.

RODIN GETS UP GOES BACK TO WORK ON MAQUETTE.

RODIN More than I do now.

GWEN I'm changed by your hands, I can never be as I was.
The clay is setting in a different shape.

RODIN It needs wetting again. SPITS.

GWEN And again and again. I want you to keep on touching, pressing,
pinching the clay, tearing my flesh, moulding me, remoulding me. I
want...

GWEN RUNS AND PUTS DANCE MUSIC ON GRAMOPHONE. JOINS RILKE IN
HIS DANCE.

RILKE SHOUTING
Our great master Rodin knows how to find joy in simple things.

GWEN A flower, a tree, soft rain, mists.

RILKE Through them he shows us how everything is beautiful and understood.

GWENHe's in love with nature.

RILKE WILD DANCING And with him everything is in blossom.
He moves like a star, he's beyond all measure!
He finds a joy as nameless as the joy of childhood.
The smallest things come to him and open up to him, we have
nothing to do but listen, for work itself comes out of this
listening, one must lift it out with both arms for it is heavy.

PAUSES PANTING, THEN SPINS OFF AGAIN.

RILKE My strength often fails, but Rodin lifts everything and lifts it out
beyond himself.

GWEN He loves everything, the whole world.

RODIN STANDS AND ASSESSES.

RODIN You're getting thinner Gwen.

GWEN STOPS ABRUPTLY AND PULLS A SHEET AROUND HERSELF

GWEN I can't eat. There's no time - when can I eat? I model here every day and
then when I go home I try and do my own work, my paintings.

RODIN But you must eat to keep healthy. And we must keep healthy
so we can work and besides, besides - LAUGHS - it's another
pleasure after all - another pleasure of the flesh and you've become fond
of those. Just think - a soft avocado, drenched in oil, a glace melting on
the tongue, a rare steak running with juice.

GWEN GOES TO HIM TAKES HIS HAND AND PUTS IT BETWEEN HER LEGS

GWEN Running with juice like I am now - here - feel - wet your hand
then soften the clay.

RODIN EXAMINING HIS HAND Is it blood?

GWEN Would that disgust you? Surely not - surely the evidence of my
fecundity should excite you - a lover of nature, a man of the flesh.

RILKE WRITING AND READING
*She was already loosened like long hair
and given far and wide like fallen rain,
and dealt out like a manifold supply.*

GWEN Where shall we do it?

RODIN It's late.

GWEN Here on the floor?

RODIN LAUGHS Any scrap of carpet, any dirty floor board.

GWEN Here - on the couch?

RODIN The concierge.

GWEN Behind the door then.

RODIN Insatiable.

GWEN Insatiable - loosened, utterly, strips of hair and clothes and flesh. Here, here.

RODIN I'm tired.

GWEN What are you saying? A year ago we did it once, twice, again and again, until I could hardly stand.

RODIN That was a year ago, I'm a year older now.

GWEN Not in your heart, not inside.

RODIN Inside, outside, both. When you're my age you'll know. I'm old Gwen and I'm ill.

GWEN No.

RODIN You wear me out.

GWEN No.

RODIN It's cold in here.

GWEN Give me your hand - yes it is cold. Let me kiss it and put it back here. BETWEEN LEGS. That'll warm you.

RODIN Not enough. I want to go to bed.

GWEN Yes, yes, I'll make your bed.

RODIN My wife has already made it.

GWEN But I can warm it for you.

RODIN No, go home.

GWEN I don't want to. I don't want to close my door and be left alone with just a dead fire and an empty bed.

RILKE Crisp white linen.

GWEN My bed feels like slabs of cold rock and there's no one to keep me warm.... no one.

RILKE If there's no one the moment is pure and clean - like a blank sheet of paper.

GWEN Covered in tears.

RILKE That's only his spit - it'll dry.

GWEN I don't want it to.

RILKE *Even now she was no longer that fair woman
who'd sometimes echoed in the poet's poems,
no longer the wide couch's scent and island,
nor yonder man's possession any longer.*

*She was already loosened like long hair,
and given far and wide like fallen rain,
and dealt out like a manifold supply.*

She was already root.

GWEN She's still in the underworld?

RILKE Hermes is leading her out, but she's changed - in her heart she's given herself up to the dark world.

RODIN She's a fool. You're a fool Gwen.

GWEN No, I'm not like her - I still want more light. I'm waiting.

RILKE *Full as a fruit with sweetness and with darkness.*

RODIN What for? What are you waiting for? I don't need you any more. I'm tired of 'The Whistler' there's something wrong with the pose - derivative - not original enough. Leave me alone - go home for god's sake - get on with your *own* work.

RILKE PULLS A CHAIR INTO THE MIDDLE OF THE ROOM FACING A MIRROR AND SITS GWEN ON IT. SHE REMOVES THE SHEET FROM HER BODY AND HE GIVES HER A PAD OF PAPER AND A PENCIL. HE WINDS UP THE GRAMOPHONE AND PUTS ON A RECORD OF GLUCK'S ARIA CHE FARO. RODIN WORKS ON HIS MAQUETTE AND GWEN DRAWS HERSELF.

GWEN Viewed from the front the spinal column seems to be straight. Viewed laterally, the spinal column presents several curves. These curvatures are buffers in counteracting the effects of violent jars or shocks.

When the axis of a sitting trunk is vertical, the weight of the head and trunk rests on the pelvis and the muscles of the back prevent the trunk from falling forwards.

I try to understand and then show it. I draw it once, but my
hand...shakes too violently, I draw it again and my tears....

RODIN SPITS AT HIS MAQUETTE, RILKE GASPS, GWEN SOBS.

FOURTH MOVEMENT

VERY LOUD SOUNTRACK OF FIRST WORLD WAR
RILKE JUMPS UP AND STANDS TO ATTENTION.

RILKE Ya, ya meine muttie, ich gehe, fur mein Kaiser und meinen fatherland,
 ya, ya.

HE MARCHES OVER AND KISSES GWEN'S HAND THEN LEANS AND WHISPERS
IN HER EAR.

*She had attained a new virginity
and was intangible; her sex had closed
like a young flower at the approach of evening,
and her pale hands had grown so disaccustomed
to being a wife...,*

GWEN SHIVERS, REMOVES HER HAND

RILKE *...that even the slim god's
 endless gentle contact as he led her
 repelled her like too great an intimacy.*

RILKE APPROACHES RODIN WHO IGNORES HIM. RILKE STANDS TO
ATTENTION BOWS, CLICKS HIS HEELS AND EXITS PUTTING FIRST WORLD
WAR GERMAN SONG ON GRAMOPHONE.

AS SOON AS RILKE EXITS RODIN STOPS WORKING (HE SEEMS SUDDENLY OLD
AND ILL) AND WALKS SLOWLY ROUND THE STUDIO THROWING
DUSTSHEETS OVER THE CLAY FIGURES. HE PICKS UP A SMALL LUMP OF
CLAY AND SLUMPS IN A CHAIR WITH HIS BACK TO GWEN WORKING IT
BETWEEN HIS FINGERS. GWEN GOES OVER TO THE STOVE WHERE SHE SITS
HUNCHED AND SHIVERING.

FADE IN THE SOUNDS OF A TRAIN STATION (GARE MONTPARNASSE) ABOUT
200 PEOPLE MILL ABOUT, PLUS CARTS OF LUGGAGE, THE ODD PIG. WHISTLES
BLOW, TRAINS DEPART. ABOVE THE GENERAL NOISE AND CONVERSATION
VOICES CALL OUT. THIS COMBINED WITH THE SOUNDS OF WAR BECOMES
DEAFENING. GWEN STANDS HOLDING HER HANDS OVER HER EARS.

GWEN Herded in like cattle. I won't go. Why should I? He's my home and
 France is his home. I'm staying here.

THE SOUNDTRACK STOPS ABRUPTLY.

*The French papers say very little - many wounded come in now - one
died last night at Meudon - I feel very nervous tonight - perhaps it's
because of the wind and reading of the merchant ships sunk in the canal*

by the submarines. France is giving its all - the new generation as well as the old. At night from my window I see the lights of the avions.
SITS BY STOVE AGAIN It's so cold this winter.
SHIVERS, WARMS HANDS Icy cold and the boom of the German long range guns makes us feel even colder. I often wake in the morning to find acacia leaves of frost on the window and they remain even when the stove is lit. Food's so scarce and I have this cough.... COUGHS

RODIN KNEADS CLAY AND MUTTERS TO HIMSELF. RILKE RE ENTERS AND LOOKS AT THEM BOTH. RODIN HOLDS THE CLAY OUT TO HIM.

RODIN The clay stays wet now - like blood.

RILKE Don't talk about blood.

RODIN Why not? STANDS UP WITH SOME EFFORT
Just because yours is rotten.

RODIN GOES OVER TO RILKE AND PULLS OPEN HIS JACKET - THERE IS BLOOD ON HIS SHIRT. RILKE IS SUDDENLY IN GREAT PAIN.

RODIN Painful eh?

RILKE Agonising.

RODIN How much longer?

RILKE I'm tougher than I look - enough time to write about *your* death.

RODIN The Sonnets to Orpheus...and of course, that other one.... how did it start...*Painless at last his being escaped from the terrible body of pain.* What was that one called?

RILKE The Harrowing of Hell.

RODIN Yes...yes of course. LAUGHS AND GOES BACK TO SLUMP IN CHAIR.
'The Harrowing of Hell.' This war, this filthy war has gone on too long. France is tired and so am I.

RILKE GOES BACK TO THE DESK AND READS. GWEN CONSIDERS THEM BOTH AND THEN GOES BACK TO THE STOVE.

RODIN All my life I've been making. Taking what is here...
HITS PIT OF STOMACH WITH FIST HOLDING CLAY
...What I have felt here. Taking it....
REMOVES FIST FROM STOMACH.... and working it.
CLASPS AND UNCLASPS FIST, TRYING TO WORK CLAY
Work, work, yes, that's the thing.
STOPS KNEADING IN DISGUST.

The thing I can't do any more. Not for the life of me. LAUGHS
Not for the life of me. My fingers just don't work any more.
There's no feeling in them. I can move them, but they're mechanical,
like some pincers you buy in the shop. My fingers are dead and there's a
dead hand on my work. I feel nothing so I make nothing. So I am
nothing.

THE CLAY FALLS FROM RODIN'S HAND, HE GASPS AND THEN LIES
BACK IN HIS CHAIR

RILKE READING AND WRITING
*And when, abruptly swift,
the god laid hold of her and, with an anguished
cry, uttered the words: He has turned round! -
she took in nothing, and said softly: Who?*

GWEN JUMPS TO HER FEET LOOKS FRENZIEDLY AROUND HER

GWEN SCREAMS Who? Who are you writing about?

RILKE *But in the distance, dark in the bright exit,
someone or other stood whose countenance
was indistinguishable.*

GWEN Tell me who it is.

RILKE Look in the mirror.

GWEN RUNS TO THE MIRROR

GWEN A man, but I can't see.... is it you? Are you watching for me Hermes?

RILKE No, it's Orpheus, he's turned round and you have to go back.

GWEN But he's still waiting.

RUNS OVER TO RODIN AND PICKS UP HIS HAND PUTS IT AGAINST
HER CHEEK AND THEN RUBS IT AS IF TO WARM IT.

GWEN Wait for me.

RILKE Waiting as we all wait - standing in the middle of life and death
- coming and going.

GWEN RUNS BACK TO THE MIRROR.

GWEN Still there....

GWEN RUNS TO RODIN, RUBS HIS CHEEKS AND KISSES HIM.

GWEN Cold I can't seem to.... BACK AT MIRROR He's going....

RILKE *...yonder husband's property no longer.*

GWEN He's stepping out into the light.

RILKE Orpheus has turned and Eurydice is saved.

GWEN Saved? What do you mean? I'm lost.

GWEN RUNS TO RODIN AND RUBS HIS HAND FRANTICALLY.

GWEN Cold... deathly...deathly...

RILKE Being is born of non-being.

GWEN So cold the clay on them is still wet.

RILKEof having already let go.

GWEN STARTS LICKING HIS HAND Let me warm you.
 RUBS HAND THEN BLOWS ON IT Do you remember this?
 RUBS THEN KISSES HAND And that? How you warmed me?
 Young again remember...young and vigorous....
 PUTS HIS HAND BETWEEN HER LEGS and full of desire....

RILKE Let him go.

GWEN I can't...STARTS TO KISS HIM ON THE MOUTH So dry.
 SPITS ON HER FINGER AND RUBS IT ROUND HIS LIPS.
 There. GOES BACK TO HIS HAND AND RUBS AND LICKS IT. There
 -like a little cat. TAKES HIS HAND AND PUTS IT ON HER CHEEK
 Stroke me. Yes - and again. KISSES HIS HAND PASSIONATELY. I
 can warm you, I can. CLIMBS UP ON HIM AND PRESSES HERSELF
 AGAINST HIM. Another moment - just one more. TURNS TO RILKE.
 Again Rilke - from the beginning.

RILKE GIVES A DESPAIRING GESTURE.

GWEN *Like silent veins of silver ore, Orpheus ahead and Eurydice coming on....*
and on and on...into the light. TO RODIN Don't look back, don't.....
 SCREAMS Don't! BEATS ON RODIN'S CHEST WITH HER FISTS.

RILKE But Eurydice doesn't care - she's gone past wanting, past longing.

GWEN I care - I want.... I'll endure anything...TO RODIN
 Don't turn, don't condemn me.

RILKE GOES TO THE MIRROR AND LOOKS INTO IT.

RILKE He's gone.

GWEN SCREAMS AND RUNS ROUND THE STUDIO RIPPING THE SHEETS OFF THE CLAY WOMEN, THEN SHE TEARS AT HER OWN CLOTHING BEFORE FALLING TO THE FLOOR. RILKE HELPS RODIN TO HIS FEET.

RILKE *Erect no gravestone to his memory;
just let the rose blossom each year for his sake.
For it is Orpheus...
We do not need to look for other names.
Where there is poetry, it is Orpheus singing.*

AS HE GUIDES RODIN OFF STAGE, RILKE STOPS TO PUT THE FARO ON THE GRAMOPHONE, AS HE DOES SO RODIN RALLIES, LAUGHS, SLAPS A CLAY FIGURE ON THE RUMP IN PASSING AND SHOUTS.

RODIN Oh the songs of poets - they'll be the death of me!

FIFTH MOVEMENT

CHE FARO INCREASES IN VOLUME. GWEN IS STILL LYING ON THE FLOOR. RILKE RE-ENTERS AND TAKES THE RECORD OFF. GWEN SLOWLY CRAWLS TO THE MIRROR AND PEERS INTO IT.

GWEN Dark - completely, utterly - thick and heavy, lidless, sightless,
 foetid, pressing down on me. Such a dark place.
 RILKE TRIES TO PULL HER AWAY No, no, let me stay.

GWEN GETS UP, GOES OVER TO ONE OF THE CLAY WOMEN AND LIES
HER HEAD AGAINST THE FIGURE.

GWEN I want to stay. I don't want the next moment to begin.

RILKE RETURNS TO HIS DESK WHERE HE SITS EXHAUSTED

GWEN If we can hold it - just for a little longer.
 Winding through the darkness - no arrival - still journeying.
 Eurydice and Hermes. Again Rilke.

RILKE Again!

GWEN Just once more. You and I....

RILKE SIGHS, READS, STOPPING OCCASIONALLY OUT OF WEAKNESS AND
PAIN

*That was the strange unfathomed mine of souls.
And they like silent veins of silver ore,
were winding through its darkness.....*

GWEN And Orpheus?

RILKE *It seemed as though his senses were divided:
for, while his sight ran like a dog before him,
turned round, came back, and stood, time and again,
distant and waiting, at the path's next turn,
his hearing lagged behind him like a smell.
It seemed to him at times as though it stretched
back to the progress of those other two
who should be following up this whole ascent.*

GWEN We're coming Orpheus.

RILKE *Then once more there was nothing else behind him
but his climb's echo and his mantle's wind.
But still he told himself that they were coming;*

*said it aloud and heard it die away.
Yes they were coming, only they were two
that trod with fearful lightness. If he durst
but once look back....*

GWEN No Orpheus.

RILKE (*If only looking back were not undoing of this whole enterprise still to be done*)

GWEN We must keep on Rilke

RILKE IN EXTREME PAIN My blood....

GWEN *they were two....* you wrote it...

RILKE ... is drying in my veins.

RILKE STUMBLES OVER TO GWEN WHO STILL LIES AGAINST THE CLAY
FIGURE

RILKE You said they chilled your blood.

GWEN Blood, blood again.

RILKE It's on my mind. My body's on my mind. My blood is drying into
blocks of porphory, red as hell. I feel the landscape of my mind in my
veins. Here look at my arm - like a dead twig and my fingers - look -
just dry sticks.

GWEN GETS UP FROM CLAY WOMAN AND TAKES HIS HAND.

GWEN You must keep moving - dancing - we were good at that remember.

SHE HOLDS RILKE AND THEY ATTEMPT A STUMBLING DANCE.
RILKE PUSHES GWEN AWAY.

RILKE We need music - listen, I can hear some...

GWEN No.

RILKE It's Orpheus.

GWEN No! Not yet, he's not playing for you yet. He's with Rodin. Rodin.
Rodin!

RILKE GETS UP ON THE PLINTH AND BEGINS TO SING CHE FARO BADLY AND
WEAKLY BUT WITH GREAT EMOTION.

RILKE SINGING What is life for me without you?

GWEN WHISPERS Rodin!

RILKE SINGING What is life if thou art dead?

GWEN WHISPERS Not dead.

RILKE SINGING What is life if thou art dead...art dead...?

GWEN WHISPERS Dead? Art... dead?

RILKE SINGING....Art dead...art dead....art dead....

GWEN SCREAMS Yes, Rodin is dead!

RILKE And his art? When Orpheus followed Eurydice down into the
underworld it was his music - *his art* - that so touched Persephone's
heart that she pleaded with Pluto to let Eurydice go - his music. Can
you hear it? I can - it's Orpheus - playing for me, putting my words to
music.
SPREADING ARMS I feel so light. CIRCLING A loss of blood, a space
inside - emptiness at last. I'm emptied out.

GWEN WEARY Just like Eurydice.

RILKE Yes, finally there's nothing and I can embrace death.

GWEN *Just* like Eurydice.

RILKE *Full as a fruit with sweetness and with darkness was she with her great death.*

GWEN Alright – I know, I heard you before.

RILKE Embracing death intensifies my life. And I want these last moments to
be so alive. I want to see everything as if for the first time. To
experience life so perfectly...

GWEN That you can leave it?

RILKE Death will have its own beauty.

 ... rocks and ghostly forests. Bridges over voidness,

 And I will approach them - my steps encircled by the clinging grave
clothes. I will enter emptiness so lightly, floating over the void, I will
see nothing and hear nothing. I will want nothing. I'm almost at the
end, at the end of longing...and that.... is the beginning of everything.

GWEN But my poem?

RILKE GOES TO THE DESK AND BEGINS TO WRITE. GWEN SITS ON A CHAIR IN FRONT OF THE MIRROR AND BEGINS TO DRAW HERSELF. MUSIC. RILKE GETS UP AND SLOWLY DANCES BACKWARDS HIS ARMS OUTSTRETCHED.

RILKE SILENTLY MOUTHING The end of longing, the end of longing,
the end of longing.

RODIN RE-ENTERS EMBRACES RILKE AND THEY EXIT ARMS AROUND EACH OTHER. GWEN STOPS DRAWING AND WATCHES THEM DESPAIRINGLY, THEN TURNS BACK TO THE MIRROR AND DRAWS AGAIN. MUSIC LOWERS.

GWEN I still long, I still want, I can't help it. But if I look with courage...
STOPS DRAWING AND LEANS TOWARDS MIRROR EXAMINING
REFLECTION...she looks back with the same – courage Gwen – can I
give myself strength? There's no one else to give it to me – no Rodin,
no...no Rilke.
The skeleton is the firm framework of the human body. It's
partly a support, partly a protection for the vulnerable inner
organs....WEEPING.... the vulnerable inner organs.

SIXTH MOVEMENT

MUSIC VERY LOUD. VERA ENTERS AND PROCEEDS ACROSS THE STAGE IN A WALKING DANCE, FALLING PERIODICALLY TO HER KNEES TO PRAY. SHE APPROACHES GWEN AND PULLS HER DOWN ONTO HER KNEES. GWEN STRUGGLES TO GET BACK TO HER DRAWING BUT VERA CONTINUES TO PULL GWEN INTO A POSITION OF PRAYER. IN THE END THE WOMEN STOP IN AN AWKWARD EMBRACE. MUSIC ENDS.

VERA Rilke lived grief.

GWEN He died without it.

VERA But I still grieve for him.

GWEN We only really grieve for ourselves.

VERA For what we've lost.

GWEN He was my guide. He was with me in the darkness. He stayed close.

VERA So particular, so correct – even his handwriting – always perfectly formed. An example, a fine example to us all.

GWEN Sometimes he cried.

VERA Did he? I never saw him.

GWEN He had.... *sensibilities*.

VERA Oh yes sensitive of course, but always so self-contained.

GWEN Sometimes he despaired.

VERA Surely not, he was brave – surely - particularly when...
They say it was a very rare blood disease.

GWEN Agony – towards the end he was in such agony.

VERA But he hid it so well. He spared our feelings – a true gentleman.

GWEN Yes, he was a very gentle man
*The god of faring and of distant message,
the travelling- hood over his shining eyes,
the slender wand held out before his body,
the wings around his ankles lightly beating,*

VERA We both loved him. We can share our grief.

GWEN Share? Feelings? PUSHES VERA AWAY Don't be ridiculous.

VERA GOES OVER TO THE CRUCIFIX AND PULLS IT TO AN UPRIGHT POSITION
AND KNEELS IN FRONT OF IT.

VERA We can share our feelings with God. Dear God I pray for the soul of
Rilke.

GWEN Sweet, sweet Rilke.

VERA And for his friend, for my friend Gwen John.

GWEN Don't - don't pray for me.

VERA It's done out of love.

GWEN Love! LAUGHS HARSHLY Please.... spare me that.

VERA I believe everyone can be helped by love.

GWEN More are damaged by it - ask Eurydice. And I'm so wounded by it,
why.... I think one more drop of love will finish me off.

VERA Let me love you.

GWEN STARTS TO LAUGH RATHER HYSTERICALLY

GWEN Yes, yes, you want to kill me.

VERA No, I want to help you.

PULLS OUT A DUSTER AND STARTS TO DUST THE CRUCIFIX.

GWEN By doing the dusting?!

VERA But it's very dirty.

GWEN I like it like that.

VERA Let me clean it for you. Let me do God's work.

GWEN That isn't God's work. It's... What did Rilke call it? ... Ordinary life, the
domestic surface. He despised such small things.

VERA We show our devotion in many ways. You see God in nature, I see
him...

GWEN INTERRUPTING, LAUGHING In a duster! Stop it. You're worth more than this drudgery.

VERA No - God made me a woman - to do women's work. I accept the condition of my sex. When I sweep the floor I'm doing his will. I can't live like you do - like a man.

GWEN If I live like a man it's only because I have to - because that's the only way I know how to live and succeed in my work. I don't feel like a man. Everything I want I want as a woman.

VERA And women want love. Let me be your loving friend Gwen.

GWEN I don't need another *friend*. I don't need that kind of love. I don't want to love someone and to have them leave me...again.

VERA Isn't that a rather selfish way of looking at it?

GWEN Love is selfish.

VERA God's love isn't and I try...

GWEN INTERRUPTS LAUGHING Do you?

VERA There must be something I can help you with?

GWEN GOES BACK TO THE MIRROR AND LOOKS INTO IT
You could be my model - I'm tired of drawing myself
TURNS AND LOOKS AT VERA You could pose for me.

VERA I've never....

GWEN It's the kind of thing *friends* do for each other isn't it?

VERA I suppose so.

VERA CLIMBS UP ONTO THE PLINTH POSING AS GWEN DID FOR RODIN IN THE OPENING SCENE. SLIDE OF GWEN NAKED TO WAIST POSING.

VERA Like this?

GWEN Turn your face to the light. Ah yes. You're very young mademoiselle.

VERA Nonsense! I could be a grandmother.

GWEN You look much younger. You have an innocent face and yet....
Lean forwards a little - why do you sit like that? So upright - like a good child waiting.... for what? What is about to happen to you I wonder?

VERA LAUGHS Nothing I hope. You're going to draw me – that's all.

GWEN I've made you laugh. Are you happy then?

VERA Happy? I'm not sure.

GWEN What does make you happy Vera?

VERA Oh just simple things.

GWEN Like those flowers that grow in the cracks of walls?

VERA I want to transplant them into some rich soil – so they can really bloom.

GWEN And the trees that shade the paths of the Luxembourg gardens?

VERA Too shady – they need a good prune.

GWEN I've slept under the trees in the Luxembourg Gardens.

VERA Oh my dear – how very sad.

GWEN DRAWS VERA GOES OVER TO DESK, WRITES AND READS.

VERA *I found her intense but vulnerable. A combination which tugged at my heart.
As did her loneliness which she carried about with her, which she used as a
protection against the world – against me who only wanted to be her friend.*

VERA RETURNS TO POSE

VERA But the trees in the Bois de Boulogne...

GWEN Are *they* to your taste?

VERA They're wilder, more natural.

GWEN More natural, I knew it. You love simple, natural things but if they're wild too...well...that's more exciting isn't it? And you can't resist... perhaps... the thought, just the chance that... at any moment....

VERA The wind was so wild the other night. I could see the tossing trees from my window; I could hear the branches breaking.

GWEN Your window was open?

VERA To freshen my room.

GWEN Perhaps we are alike in some ways. Maybe...?

VERA We can be friends?

GWEN Let me draw you.

VERA I am letting you..

GWEN But I can't draw you if I can't see you.

VERA Light the lamp, by all means – put on some candles.

GWEN Your God is naked on his cross.

VERA Are you saying you want me to...? No... no I couldn't and anyway – think - no artist has really seen my God – not in the flesh.

GWEN I must use my imagination then?

VERA If you must – I can't stop you – but I can't help feeling....

GWEN What do you feel Vera?

VERA Your eyes on me...I feel... this feels... somehow...somehow...
May god forgive me...!

GWEN I'm sure he will.

GWEN STARTS TO DRAW HER. MUSIC. GWEN SPEAKS VERY QUIETLY TO HERSELF.

GWEN The form and size of the female breast is different according to type, individual and age. As a rule, the angle formed by the axes of the two breasts should not be too large. As for the distance between the breasts....

GWEN GETS UP AND GOES OVER TO THE MAQUETTE WHICH RODIN WORKED ON IN THE FIRST SCENE. SHE LOOKS AT IT AND THEN COVERS IT WITH A CLOTH.

Dear God she reminds me of.... a moment.... before Rodin - a moment above ground, when I was young and vigorous and full of desire - a moment of possibility. She reminds me of that moment and suddenly this one is untenable - absolutely... I can't hold it... I can't live it – live in this underworld, in this dark landscape of suffering. I want to go back.... just once again. For the last time. Just once more to be above ground in a world of sun bleached grasses and eye splitting skies. To walk the lanes hand in hand, to sleep by the river on the slanting stones under the overhanging trees. Shall we Vera? Shall we my darling girl?

GOES BACK TO HER DRAWING.
TURNS TOWARDS MIRROR HOLDS OUT ARM.

Towards the wrist the forearm becomes gradually thinner and the bones project more and more between the muscles and the tendons until there's only skin covering bone. I try to understand and then show it. DRAWING I draw it once - I make the line under the wrist curve like a swan's neck - but my mark is too broad. I try again, but this time the wrist looks too frail and thin - a third attempt - and there it is - delicacy and strength. Then I turn.... and look at Vera. The line of her neck echoes the line on my paper. It's just as perfect and just as beautiful.

Thank you Rilke. Sweet, sweet Rilke, your death has brought Vera to me - brought this moment back to me, LOWERS VOICE TO A WHISPER but this time the peach juice runs into my mouth and... MUTTERS.... tastes sweet as her sweat.

VERA COMES DOWN TO LOOK AT GWEN'S DRAWING.

VERA. Who's this?

GWEN You.

VERA No it's not. I don't look like this - so quiet - so ... look here - at my hands. I never hold my hands like that - all folded up...like that...never! And my hair...

GWEN I used my imagination.

VERA No, no you didn't. I thought you were tired of drawing yourself, but you're not at all. You haven't seen me, you haven't drawn me. Look - isn't it obvious. It is to me. It's you Gwen. You've drawn yourself.

GWEN Rilke wrote a poem to a wife he couldn't even touch and I've drawn a woman...

VERA A woman with her hands folded. My hands are busy all day.

GWEN With God's work - dusting!

VERA I strive to help people.

GWEN For God's sake!

VERA Loving God - working for him is a great comfort to me.

GWEN Comfort! Is that what you want? I don't want comfort.

VERA EXAMINING DRAWING She looks comfortable... or maybe...

She looks resigned at least.

GWEN Then it can't be me.

VERA KNEELS IN FRONT OF CRUCIFIX I shall pray for you
– pray that you will find peace.

GWEN I don't want peace, I want love.

VERA But I did offer you....

GWEN God's love or friendship – unselfish love. I prefer the selfish kind. Rilke wrote a poem to a wife he couldn't touch and I've drawn a woman *I* can't touch – not deeply – I couldn't make you suffer.

VERA Why would you want to?

GWEN Because love is suffering. Rodin taught me that and Rilke.

VERA They were wrong.

GWEN Were they? Isn't that what your God teaches too?
"By his suffering, through his love..."

VERA Yes, but he's talking about sacrifice, about service.

GWEN Oh, we're back to that again.

VERA I wish you would listen to me Gwen.

GWEN And I wish you would listen to me. Orpheus emerged out of Hades into a world that couldn't hear his music.... And Eurydice is not out of Hell yet.

VERA I shall pray for you.

GWEN I shall pray too.

GWEN STARTS TO DRAW AGAIN

VERA PRAYING Dear God, please help your servant Gwen...
LOOKS ROUND Gwen? You're not praying.

GWEN I am.

VERA Come and kneel with me then.

GWEN I don't need to. This is my prayer - my drawing. This is my meditation, my act of worship

VERA GETS UP AND COMES OVER TO LOOK AT THE DRAWING

VERA But you're not even drawing properly - you're just tracing.

GWEN When a line is copied it becomes simplified. We're left with what's essential.

VERA What's true.

GWEN True? Truths are like memories; we all have our own... and sometimes we try and relive them.

VERA A mistake surely?

GWEN In a tracing something can be lost.... a subtlety of detail, a vitality and warmth, a sense of life, a freshness - it's never the same as the original.

VERA It becomes something quite different.

GWEN Quite different. It's transformed.

VERA Into something better?

GWEN Or worse. When Orpheus played for the Thracian women they hated his music.

VERA Perhaps he should have been praying for the soul of Eurydice. Maybe he could have saved her.

GWEN With his prayer? I don't think so.

VERA He lost faith.

GWEN He loved her too much.

VERA He put his faith in people instead of God. You're the same.

GWEN How can I help it when even their absence is more potent than His presence?

VERA There's no hope for you.

GWEN *You* could redeem me. You could be my guide out of hell. We could walk into the light together.

VERA I walk with God.

GWEN They tore Orpheus limb from limb... and threw his head into the

river along with his lyre.

VERA Why do you keep telling me about Orpheus?

GWEN I seem to hear his music again. Rilke heard it.
Can you hear it Vera?

VERA Of course not.

GWEN Why can't you? This is a chance for us.

VERA Us?

GWEN A new moment - our moment - one that can make the future bearable.

VERA God makes my future bearable.

GWEN Ah.

GWEN TURNS BACK TO THE MIRROR – VERA STANDS BEHIND HER

VERA Look – we're not young Gwen. Surely we've learned?

GWEN I've had three of the best teachers. And I've done my revision well. I've
been back over it many, many times. First lesson...POINTS TO MIRROR
Look Vera – am I beautiful?

VERA Of course.

GWEN You're lying. I'm not beautiful, but Dorelia was. SHE GETS UP AND
LEANS HER HEAD ON VERA'S SHOULDER So, so beautiful.
INHALES DEEPLY. And for my second lesson I learned what God
smelt like.

VERA MOVES AWAY

VERA You can't shock me.

GWEN PUTS OUT A HAND TO TOUCH VERA WHO MOVES AWAY AGAIN.

GWEN Or touch you?

VERA I'm touched by your ignorance – by how little you've learned.

GWEN LAUGHS You don't approve of my education then?

VERA God would have taught you more and you would have suffered less.

GWEN But I might never have walked to Rome or smelt Rodin's beard, or read Rilke's poetry.

VERA Earthly pleasures.

GWEN Even Rilke's poetry?

SHE GOES OVER TO THE DESK, PICKS UP A PIECE OF PAPER AND READS IT.

GWEN *.....rocks and ghostly forests.
Bridges over voidness
and that immense, grey, unreflecting pool
that hung above its so far distant bed
like a rainy sky above a landscape.*

Rilke hardly lived in this world.

VERA He had no hope of any other – he didn't believe in God.

GWEN He just didn't believe in churches...GOES OVER TO CRUCIFIX ... in the earthly trappings.

VERA But he liked his own earthly goods, he liked good clothes... and shoes. His shoes were always so well polished.

GWEN RUNS A FINGER OVER THE CRUCIFIX AND EXAMINES IT FOR DUST.

GWEN Like this?

VERA Done in the service of God.

GWEN Not an earthly pleasure then?

VERA No.

GWEN But mine were?

VERA Yes, that's why you suffered for them.

GWEN I always wondered.

VERA You wanted to suffer - you made a point of it.

GWEN Orpheus's head floated down the river and into the sea. It was washed up and buried on the island of Lesbos.... but his singing continued.

VERA Beyond the grave?

GWEN 'My name called as I pass by means poetry will never die!'

VERA Orpheus again I suppose?

GWEN Just his head crying out as it floated down the river.

VERA You're making fun of me. You're not serious at all.
I thought you were - I felt sorry for you. I thought we were friends.

GWEN Ah friends.

VERA I thought I could help you.

GWEN You thought you could teach me.

VERA Yes.

GWEN You have – you've taught me the last lesson – the same lesson.

*Wrapt in herself she wandered. And her deadness
was filling her like fullness.*

*Full as a fruit with sweetness and with darkness
was she with her great death, which was so new
that for the time she could take nothing in.*

VERA Some people never learn.

GWEN Some people keep on learning. The same wound re-opened until it is
etched into their skin. Again, again. Until it'll never heal without leaving
a mark – a scar. They sit in front of a mirror and draw blood – draw
and draw – the same face, the same suffering. But perhaps at last I have
drawn it out of myself.

*She had attained a new virginity
and was intangible; her sex had closed
like a young flower at the approach of evening....*

VERA Some sense at last.

GWEN Oh go away – and take this PICKS UP CRUCIFIX with you.

VERA PULLS THE CRUCIFIX AWAY FROM GWEN

VERA Let go - you've no right to touch it.

GWEN And no right to touch you either? Ah well.... if you're leaving me,
won't you kiss me goodbye?

VERA Here? In the sight of God?

GWEN Mary kissed His wounds - you could kiss mine.
 A healing kiss, a chaste kiss of friendship

VERA That's all?

GWEN What else could it be?

VERA KISSES GWEN AND EXITS

GWEN Women seduced by each other's sensuality, drugged by each other's
 scent, entranced to see their own desirability in the other - like in a
 mirror. Yes, I remember that moment. How it was with Dorelia. But
 this moment is different and even as I speak it's gone – into the past.

SEVENTH MOVEMENT

GWEN GOES OVER TO THE DESK AND SIFTS THROUGH THE PAPERS

The past traced here.

LIFTS A PAGE AND READS

*And between meadows, soft and full of patience,
appeared the pale strip of the single pathway
like a long line of linen laid to bleach.*

And on this single pathway they approached

Eurydice, Hermes...and Orpheus.

*.....his hands were hanging,
heavy and clenched, out of the falling folds.....*

Orpheus who loses faith.

*For, while his sight ran like a dog before him,
Turned round, came back, and stood, time and again,
Distant and waiting, at the path's next turn,
His hearing lagged behind him like a smell.*

Orpheus who doubts.

*Then once more there was nothing else behind him
but his climb's echo and his mantle's wind.
But still he told himself that they were coming:
said it aloud and heard it die away.*

Yes they were coming. ...

*.....he could not fail to see them,
the two light-footers, following him in silence:*

Hermes and ...

In his left hand as entrusted, she...she so beloved

I was coming on.

I could feel his spit on my face, I could feel his hand - caked with dry clay, and I could taste its dry bitterness turning to thickness in my mouth. I was coming on into a moment when everything was beautiful and understood. But don't mourn for me. Don't make me go back. I

have retraced... gone over.... I have reworked, redrawn. Again and again until the line has become thick, the paper sodden with tears. Until it has fallen to pieces in my hands and I'm left with HOLDS OUT EMPTY HANDS this moment, this moment. When there's no-one left. And it's the best moment because there's nothing to fear, because I'm empty, emptied out, and light. So very light. Like Rilke I'm lighter than life. I'm Eurydice at last and at the end of my poem.

GWEN SEARCHES ON THE DESK AGAIN. SHE PICKS UP A SHEET OF WRITING, READS A LITTLE TO HERSELF AND SMILES. THEN SHE READS OUT LOUD.

*But in the distance, dark in the bright exit,
someone or other stood, whose countenance
was indistinguishable. Stood and saw
how, on a strip of pathway between meadows,
with sorrow in his look, the god of message
silently turned to follow one already
going back again along that self-same pathway,
her steps encircled by the clinging grave-clothes,
uncertain, gentle, and without impatience.*

Myth

This section concentrates initially on the background research for the play and on the preliminary writings. I then go on to describe the action of the play and illustrate this by reference to sections of the dialogue.

Myths end up having our hides. Logos opens its great maw, and swallows us whole. (Cixous (1977)1991 p15)

Greek myth is full of mothers and daughters, women and girls in extremis, caught bound, raped, held against their will, occasionally saved by their wits. Mythic narrative connects space, place and time, above and below, air and earth, earth and water. It links the pagan to the modern, the pre and post, the before and after of modernity and it activates meanings we barely acknowledge that often lie buried, – or smothered – underneath the trace sediment of etymological wanderings across time and space. (MacDonald, 2005 Pores 2)

So, there's no reason to have to constantly take things apart and investigate them to see how they work. What we really need is some kind of instruction. I greatly distrust the usual bourgeois linear narrative of the 19th century, where the reader identifies with the character and the character goes through various moral crises. So I was searching structurally for a new kind of narrative, and that's when I became very interested in myths. Myths were narratives that were presented prior to that whole bourgeois structure.

(Benjamin Bratton in conversation with Kathy Acker)

Tracings was the culmination of a series of works initiated by Annie Castledine. Annie had used Gwen John previously as a biographical source, devising and directing Sheila Yeger's stage play *Self Portrait* and a short biographical film for Welsh Television.

These two performance texts provided the starting point for my research. I then read a series of other texts, including biographies by Susan Chitty, Mary Taubman, Cecily Langdale and Michael Holroyd (on Augustus John), before

visiting the National Library of Wales where I met Ceridwen Lloyd-Morgan. She gave me her monograph and a very complete schedule, listing the library's purchase of papers relating to Gwen John. The most complete documentation of John's time in Paris was contained in her continuous correspondence with Ursula Tyrwhitt and I gained permission for the library to make photocopies of these letters. This correspondence and research formed the basis for the first version for live performance, *Gwen John*¹⁴¹ and a script for radio, *A Fine Sense of Tone*.

Meanwhile, I had been deepening my research; I had found reference to Rainer Maria Rilke in Gwen John's correspondence. Pursuing this connection, I further discovered that Rilke had been acting as Rodin's secretary at the same time as Gwen was sitting for Rodin's unfinished sculpture, *Whistler's Muse*. I read Rilke's collected letters where he gives a full account of his initial meeting with Rodin, their developing relationship and his eventual humiliating banishment. Between the accounts of Rodin's life and Rilke's letters, there is evidence that Rodin's interest in this relationship was more pragmatic than Rilke's, centring on Rilke's 'use' to him as a secretary. Rodin takes pride in Rilke's beautiful hand, for instance, and the clarity and authority it brings to his correspondence. In Rilke's letters to his wife Clara, however, we read of his

¹⁴¹ Members of the Theatre staff at Dartington College of Arts undertook a rehearsed reading of this piece under the direction of Annie Castledine, who then commissioned me to write a radio play based on this material. The play was intended to form part of a series of plays for Radio Four under the title 'Women of the Slade'. This radio version (also entitled *Tracings*) was completed just as the BBC decided to withdraw their commission for the series and so it has not been broadcast, despite the enthusiastic support of Annie Castledine and John Taylor of *Fiction Factory*.

fascination with Rodin. They contain rapturous descriptions of Rodin's virility, power and charisma:

I found him smaller, and yet more powerful, more kindly and more noble. And his mouth has a speech whose ring is good, intimate and full of youth, so also is his laugh, that embarrassed and at the same time joyful laugh of a child that has been given lovely presents. We spoke of many things. (Green, Norton and Rilke, 1945 p21)

suggesting that Rilke views the relationship very differently; that he sees Rodin as possessing inspirational approaches to life, sexuality and art.

John's correspondence with Rodin, held by The National Library of Wales, is conducted in very restricted French, but nevertheless it reveals some similarities between her view of Rodin and Rilke's. Both give descriptions of Rodin seemingly authored by obsessed and worshipping lovers. This is John's actual status, but the letters show how both she and Rilke are in thrall to Rodin's persona. One is led to suspect that, for Rilke, part of this adoration may lie in awareness that Rodin's personality is very different from his own.

Describing Rodin's major work *Porte de L'Enfer* (*The Gates of Hell*) he says:

The depths of the nights of love unfolded themselves to him and revealed the dark, sorrowful and blissful breadth of a realm like that of a still heroic world in which there were no garments, in which faces were extinguished and bodies were supreme. With sense at white heat he sought life in the great chaos of this wrestling, and what he saw was Life.....

Here are dreams that become deeds and deeds that fade into dreams. Here as at a gigantic gambling table, great fortunes are lost or won. Rodin's work embodied all this. He who had seen so much life, found here life's fullness and abundance.' (Rilke and Leishman, 1945 p30)

John's position is different; the evidence suggests a woman in the grip of

an intense sexual passion. Her understanding and appreciation of Rodin emerges out of their initial sexual relationship and her developing sexual obsession is only enhanced by his eventual coolness towards her as he moves on to new liaisons.

What Rilke and John have in common is their aspiration to take Rodin's attitude to his work as an example for their own artistic practice:

This creator lived so completely in his conceptions, so entirely in the depths of his work, that inspiration or revelation came to him only through the medium of his art. New life in the ultimate sense meant to him new surfaces, new gestures. Thus to him the meaning of life became simple, he could err no more. (Rilke and Leishman, 1945 p62)

Cixous describes Rilke's approach as 'the world-in-the-intimacy-of-myself-Rilke' (Cixous, 1991 p75). And in his monograph on Rodin, Rilke describes Rodin's working practice in the following way: 'Again and again in his figures Rodin returned to this bending inward, to this intense listening to one's own depth' (Rilke and Leishman, 1945 p23). A predisposition to surrender the self into the aura and power of another is common to both John and Rilke; they both have a history of impetuous infatuations. Gwen's continuing, circular, revisiting of her ability to surrender to such emotions; beginning with her infatuation with Dorelia McNeill and continuing after Rodin into her relationship with Vera Oumanscoff was of particular interest to me and contributed to the development of the form of *Tracings*.

'....as soon as Eurydice calls Orpheus down to the depths where beings change, Orpheus perceives that he is himself (in) Eurydice. As soon as you let yourself be led beyond codes, your body filled with fear and with joy, the words diverge, you are no longer enclosed in the map

of social constructions, you no longer walk between walls, meanings flow, the world of railways explodes, the air circulates, desires shatter images, passions are no longer chained to genealogies, life is no longer nailed down to generational time, love is no longer shunted off on the course decided upon by the administration of public alliances. And you are returned to your innocences, your possibilities, the abundance of your intensities.'

(Cixous, 1991 pp 49-50)

John was a serial self-deluder. All the evidence suggests that none of the objects of her obsessive adoration returned her strength of emotion to any corresponding degree. And yet she persisted and remained faithful; until death in Rodin's case.

Looking for ways of exploring this 'revisiting of pain',¹⁴² I re-read Rilke's poetry and found one example which seemed to contain many possibilities and resonances. This particular text, 'Orpheus. Eurydice. Hermes.' made reference to descent, submersion and worlds below the surface. It cites these subjects in a similar manner to Cixous. In 'The School of the Dead', she frequents such imagery, charging it with methodological significance in relation to women's writing: 'Tchoukovskaia tells us about "plunging" as if it's drinking or eating. She says: "I am going to plunge." This plunge is her way of going to write' (Cixous, 1993 p14).¹⁴³

In her essay on Samuel Delany, Kathy Acker also offers a useful addition to this notion of descent as an approach to writing and its link to the myth of Orpheus and Eurydice. She says,

¹⁴² See also later reference to Kristeva's observations on melancholy and depression in this section p295.

¹⁴³ See also references to plunging and 'watery' metaphors on pp150-151 and in the 'Diving' section of 'What is it you wish to speak of?' Appendix Two pplxxi-lxxii.

Remember: it all comes down. One must go down to see. Down into language. Once upon a time there was a writer; his name was Orpheus. He was and is the only writer in the world because every author is Orpheus. He was searching for love.

For his love. For Eurydice (Kathy Acker, 1997b, p62)

Writing more generally of Cixous' interest in myth Toril Moi has the following to say,

This constant return to biblical and mythological imagery signals Cixous investment in the world of myth: a world that, like the distant country of fairy tales is perceived as pervasively meaningful, as closure and unity. The mythical or religious discourse presents a universe where all difference, struggle and discord can in the end be satisfactorily resolved. (Moi, 1998 p116)

And Cixous herself would seem to offer yet another version of her investment in myth when she responds to this question by Verena Andermatt Conley:

V.C. You also seem to privilege myths, which are closely related to dreams:

H.C. I am passionately interested in myths because they are always [...] outside the law, like the unconscious. Only afterward there is the story, which signifies that there has been a clash between the in-law and the out-law. I do not say transgression, because it is *not* transgressive. The other world comes and collides with reality, with the reality principle. What happens? Interpretation, of course, because we do have myths and their interpretations. One never questions enough the traditions of interpretation of myth, and all myths have been referred to a masculine interpretation. If we women read them, we read them otherwise. That is why I often nourish my texts, in my own way, at those mythic sources. (Cixous, trans. Conley, 1991 p155)

Cixous is interested in those myths that sustain the logic of patriarchy and she attempts to undercut the power of these myths by unpicking the way they work.

Levi-Strauss too is concerned with the way myths reproduce the established ideological configurations of gender and identity. He too makes

links between writing and myth, describing the myth as a species of 'ur-narrative' and likening its structure to the structure of language (Levi-Strauss, trans. Jacobson and Schoepf, 1963 p210). Like Freud, Levi-Strauss chooses Oedipus as an example and, using the analytical tools provided by structural linguistics, investigates myth's structure. In the following quotation, Janet Roof, discussing Strauss' approach, clearly shows how the myth of Oedipus functions as a repressive narrative:

The Oedipus narrative thus reveals and performs narrative's function of covering over one origin in favor of another as well as the process by which that second origin becomes originary and the way both repress the feminine in favor of the masculine. (Roof, 1996 p66)

However, myths also have the capacity to be read 'otherwise'. Matka Zupancic in her paper 'Tatiana' (1999 pp99-102) describes how in 'The Laugh of the Medusa', Cixous creates new feminist utopias through a re-invocation of the mythical figure of Medusa. In Cixous' interpretation Medusa becomes proactive, creative, a writer. Cixous is using myth as a way of examining those representations of women that emerge out of the collective unconscious: those archetypes that are part of our cultural understanding of how relationships function. Hers is an attempt to retranslate and reconsider these texts as a precursor to the creation of new textual visions of feminist utopias.

As well as this investment in the re-interpretation of myth, Cixous has a loyalty to poets in general and Rilke in particular. In an exchange with Verena Conley she claims Rilke and poets as,

the closest allies of women [...] They are our friends. True, they are the ones who are the furthest removed from anything decisive, cutting, and they let their femininity traverse them. (Cixous, 1991 p152)

Cixous also shares Rilke's belief that to begin (writing, living) we must have death. 'We need a dead wo(man) to begin' (Cixous, 1993 p7).¹⁴⁴

RILKE Embracing death intensifies my life. And I want these last moments to be so alive. I want to see everything as if for the first time. To experience life so perfectly.....

GWEN That you can leave it?

RILKE Death will have its own beauty..... rocks and ghostly forests. Bridges over voidness. And I will approach them – my steps encircled by the clinging grave clothes. I will enter emptiness so lightly, floating over the void, I will see nothing and hear nothing. I will want nothing. I'm almost at the end, at the end of longing...and that....is the beginning of everything.¹⁴⁵

Acker expands on Cixous' general comment on poets using Orpheus' search for Eurydice as an example:

'So Orpheus couldn't see her anymore. Dead, she became secreted, secret. He wouldn't accept her death, death. Every poet is revolutionary. Orpheus started searching for Eurydice, for his secret. For all that was now unknown and perhaps, unknowable. He journeyed, for he had no choice, into the land of death.

For the poet, the world is word. Words. Not that precisely. Precisely: the world and words fuck each other. Delany is Orpheus searching for Eurydice by means of words. By going down into words. Into the book.

As you read this, you will become Delany/Orpheus.'

(Acker, 1997 p62)¹⁴⁶

¹⁴⁴ See also 'Last Words' which follows this section.

¹⁴⁵ Please note, as in other commentaries, direct quotations from *Tracings* will be shown in bold.

¹⁴⁶ This is part of *Delany the Magician*, a foreword to *Trouble on Triton* by Samuel R. Delany (1996) reprinted in Acker's collection *Bodies of Work*, 'Every book, remember, is dead until a reader activates it by reading. Every time that you read you are walking among the dead, and, if you are listening, you just might hear prophecies. Aeneas did. Odysseus did. Listen to Delany, a prophet.' (Acker, 1997 p61).

In a Seminar in Paris viii quoted by Conley, Cixous describes melancholy, mourning and detachment as masculine attributes. She explains that women as life-givers are identified with continuity. She contrasts this with masculine effects, which she identifies as those of cutting and fragmenting. Given this difference, Cixous claims that Eurydice can provide a solution to the feminine association with 'duration, continuity and breadth'. Eurydice can do this because she is 'always already lost' and therefore, 'she is at the locus of separation, without possibility for reparation' (Cixous trans. Conley, 1991 p101). In an autobiographical piece which makes reference to the myth of Eurydice, Claire MacDonald observes that 'as Rilke writes her, Eurydice accepts her death. Being dead fulfils her, she is alone and complete' (Pores 3). Eurydice goes beyond any prescriptive associations because she comes from a place beyond the possibility of retrieval and therefore she exists outside restriction or masculine parameters. In *Tracings*, once Rodin and Rilke are dead, Gwen is finally outside these constraints. She has the possibility of, as Cixous would suggest, 'writing out of the frame, the pyramidal, law-based constructions which contain death' (Cixous trans. Conley, 1991 p102). Cixous maintains that, in this space, women can write (or in Gwen's case paint) in tune with their bodies.

Nighttime. OR, alone, sings,

Who will sing in the days to come
Of the death throes of their liberty?
Sleep, my love, sleep
While I sing, all your animals lie at your feet.

What poet, in whose breast hope springs eternal,
Will see the promised port after drifting through
star-wrecked seas?
Sleep, my love, sleep
For you have been through hell. (Acker, 1997 p4)

In *Tracings* I suggest that Gwen's particular tragedy might seem to hang on her inability to take advantage of her moment of freedom and I explore the possibilities inherent in her subsequent actions. I question whether, as Claire MacDonald suggests, Eurydice's real catastrophe can be seen as the failure to write (Pores 3).

To shed more light on the way I address these questions in the live performance version of *Tracings*, I continue with a more detailed description of the unfolding action of the play.

Tracings is written in seven movements. Prior to the beginning of the first movement the characters are introduced and placed in their setting. The conceit is established that Rilke is writing his poem *Orpheus. Eurydice. Hermes*. As the play opens his writing of this text has already begun and Rilke reads out some sections from the opening of the poem:

*That was the strange unfathomed mine of souls.
And they, like silent veins of silver ore,
were winding through its darkness.*

But there were rocks

*And ghostly forests. Bridges over voidness,
and that immense, grey, unreflecting pool
that hung above its so far distant bed
like a grey rainy sky above a landscape.*

*The slender husband first, in his blue mantle,
gazing in dumb impatience straight before him.
His steps devoured the way in mighty chunks
they did not pause to chew....*

Rainer Maria Rilke (translated Leishman, 1945, pP30-33)

Towards the end of this opening scene Gwen has persuaded Rodin to revisit the moment when they first met:

**That moment when everything is new, the time before
the moment of turning.....a time when everything is
possible.**

and her final words contain her response to Rilke's question asking why she wishes to go back:

**Perhaps Eurydice will be saved. Perhaps she will be in
the sunlight for ever.**

As we have already established that Gwen in some way is Eurydice:

GWEN APPROACHES RODIN

GWEN You and I are Orpheus and Eurydice.

**RILKE And I am Hermes your messenger. WAVES PAPER
I write your letters.**

we understand that it is her wish not to be condemned to the depths, but to stay above ground in a sunlit landscape; one that has already been described as the setting for her previous relationship with Dorelia. This was an ambiguous relationship; the historical evidence does not make it clear whether Dorelia and Gwen were lovers. It does, however, indicate that Gwen was fascinated and

obsessed with Dorelia, that she responded sensually to her. There is an indication of this in her letters home to Ursula which I quote in this section of *Tracings*:

**Shall we sleep by the river Dorelia?
On the slanting stones under the overhanging trees?
Shall we my darling girl?
We lie down and try to sleep, but the cold is frightful –
the stones are like ice. Dorelia and I hold each other to
keep warm. Dorelia and I.**

But when pressed by Rodin to confirm that this was a sexual relationship, Gwen speaks only of painting Dorelia and of wishing to revisit her time with Dorelia:

I want to hold the moment, I want it to go on.

Gwen also brings this desire to revisit, to her relationship with Rodin. The first movement re-enacts their first meeting and as the trio embark on a performance of this moment, we are reminded of the inevitability of narrative and of the parallel narrative (of Orpheus and Eurydice):

GWEN Now we're at the first moment?

RODIN The point of no return.

This first version of their first meeting documents the impact made on Gwen by Rodin and his studio. It is characterised by Gwen's response to the female figures distributed about the studio, in the process of being modelled:

I'm appalled by these.....these.....these women caught.

She draws parallels between these figures and the landscape of Rilke's poem –

'between roots welled up the blood that flows on to mankind' – when she says, 'they (the women posed) look like tangled roots', and when she describes the studio as, 'a vision of hell'.

Gwen's account is juxtaposed with Rilke's first impressions, taken verbatim from his letter to his wife Clara. He is equally in awe of Rodin's work and studio, but concentrates on placing it within a wider art historical context:

And this wealth, this endless, continual invention, this poise, purity and vehemence of expression, this inexhaustibleness, this youth, this still having something, still having the best to say...this is without parallel in the history of men...

Rilke's comment contrasts with Gwen's more personal response and Rodin underlines his own particularly pragmatic approach when he damages Rilke's artistic production by breaking off from the re enactment to return to the practicalities of making.

**RODIN LETS HER HANDS GO AND RETURNS TO THE
MAQUETTE WHERE HE TWISTS OFF A HUNK OF CLAY**

RODIN Pleasure and pain eh? SPITS AT THE CLAY

**RILKE LEAPING UP FROM HIS DESK. This is intolerable –
your spit – my letter is quite spoilt and so is my poem.**

In this way the first act of revisiting is brought to an unsatisfactory conclusion and, in an attempt to initiate a second version, Gwen appeals to Rodin's sensuality and his vanity. She tempts him and they both appeal to Rilke to return to his writing:

**GWEN APPROACHES HIM (RODIN) AND LAYS HER HEAD ON
THE BACK OF HIS NECK.**

GWEN **When we were younger.**

RODIN **Younger, ah yes – a temptation hard to resist – to be young and vigorous again – to have the strength in my hands and arms – to be driven to act on my desires – to have desires – to be young again ... LEADS GWEN TO RILKE Your poem – again.**

Rilke not only returns to his writing, but goes back to a section near the beginning of his poem, which we have not yet heard:

*And between meadows, soft and full of patience,
appeared the pale strip of the single pathway
like a long line of linen laid to bleach.
And on this single pathway they approached.*

He disrupts the narrative of the myth, his own writing and the narrative of the play, which proceeds as a series of re-iterated flashbacks, covering the same events, but each version representing a different viewpoint. Describing the workings of myth Levi-Strauss contrasts its diachronic or historical organization with its synchronic reiteration of a common element – its ability to contain the possibility of perpetual discovery (Levi-Strauss trans. Jacobson and Schoepf, 1963).

This second retracing uses Rilke's biography to unpick the notion of sacrifice. It examines a rejection of the ordinary domestic and personal that Rilke considers necessary to the successful development of an artistic practice.

**Ordinary life – the domestic surface is death to me –
there's no art there – I had to leave it behind.**

It is an examination of that stereotypical notion of the suffering artist, the hypersensitive individual who has particular sensitivities or sensibilities.

The person who, by nature of his pain and personal isolation, renders himself or herself more fit, more equipped for the elevated role of artist. Peggy Pelan uses Auden's description of the death of Yeats to describe the way this process works:

For death remakes the public poet as social icon (or social outcast). The signifier "Yeats will become the means by which the living modify "the words of a dead man." Thus, as Auden puts it, in the act of death the poet necessarily "became his admirers."...Yeats now belongs to his readers...Auden suggest that Yeats, in death, becomes his readers and makes them "better". (Phelan and Lane, 1998 p11)

It was a notion prevalent at the turn of the century when *Tracings* is set. It is also a stereotype which continues to have currency and which is embodied in the personal narratives of Gwen John and Rainer Maria Rilke. Subscription to such ideas could even be partially responsible for their enduring interest as artists. During my researches at The National Library of Wales, I had an useful discussion with Ceridwen Lloyd-Morgan on this subject. She felt much of the interest in Gwen John's letters stemmed from the fact that the biographical evidence they provided was particularly important to such myth making. In *Tracings*, Rodin resists this stereotype. His character is shown to be more pragmatic, more rooted in a vigorous sexuality. He is not neurasthenic, he is positively robust, both physically and mentally and in this part of the play he mischievously taunts the two aesthetes. He makes them dance together:

RODIN **He's entranced, he's set free by your youth, by your
virginity, by your inaccessible chastity and innocence.
Dance Rilke, dance with her, hold her, touch her.**

RILKE STEPS BACK SHOCKED.

RODIN But she's so young and virginal? How can she harm you,
how can she tempt you? Dance with her, dance with her.

Gwen is able to respond to this offer of physical abandonment and we understand that this is because Rodin has already been responsible for her sexual awakening. In the following dialogue 'being above ground' is the phrase used to represent this awakening. Gwen is recklessly eager to remain awakened and in the light, but such illumination is destructive for Rilke,

GWEN Yes, yes.

RODIN Not too fast for you?

GWEN I could go faster.

RODIN Be careful.

GWEN I don't want to.

RODIN You've been in the dark for a long time.

GWEN And it's so wonderful to be above ground.

RODIN Be careful – sudden exposure to brilliant light can blind.

RILKE Or it can burn. And we become disfigured.

RODIN Disfigured stars.

RILKE Who have to hide their ugliness and their suffering.

RILKE COLLAPSES

RODIN **KICKING HIM GENTLY** So much for your guide out of
the underworld. Hermes' wings seem to be broken.

and in response to Gwen's insistence that Rodin's version of events does not correlate with hers, when, still sympathetic to Rilke, she insists on the

possibility of another version, another re-tracing, Rodin reminds them both that there is a pragmatism about memory and truth:

RODIN **Look – can you see here – when a line is copied it becomes simplified. When a line is copied we're left with what's essential, what's necessary.**

GWEN **What's true.**

RODIN **True? Truths are like memories – we all have our own.**

In the third retracing such insights into Rodin's essential humanism are deepened and explored through a tender evocation of his first meeting with Gwen. It is an interaction which demonstrates their mutual appreciation of the simple and natural:

RODIN **Your little wild cat is a friend, like me.
You feel natural together.**

GWEN **Yes, we do.**

RODIN **As natural as you feel with me?**

GWEN **It's true, I do feel natural with you.**

RILKE **WRITING AND READING
He is very dear to me. That I knew at once.**

**GWEN STANDS AND RILKE APPROACHES RODIN
AND THEY CARESS HIM AND TAKE OFF HIS UPPER
GARMENTS**

GWEN **So dear and kind.**

RILKE **Such tenderness in a man.**

GWEN **Unconditional love.**

RILKE **Sweet affection.**

GWEN Warmth and security.

RILKE Care and solicitude.

GWEN Fatherly and yet.... my father...and yet...

RILKE I feel blessed by a god.

But in this last comment, 'I feel blessed by a god', we understand that Rilke is capable of turning even these simple, rather paternal virtues into a supernatural elevation of Rodin. Gwen supports Rilke's interpretation with her next action:

**GWEN TAKES RODIN'S HAND AND LEADS HIM ONTO THE
PLINTH WHERE HE STANDS MOTIONLESS LIKE A STATUE**

Sensing that she is sympathetic, Rilke then quotes his own poem in an attempt to draw Gwen into a closer identification with Eurydice's acceptance of her fate:

*she thought not of the man who went before them,
nor of the road ascending into life.
Wrapt in herself she wandered. And her deadness
was filling her like fullness.*

Rodin tries to 'save' Gwen from the acceptance suggested by these lines.

He does this by reminding her of the reality of their sensual relationship:

**No, no Gwen. Don't listen. Don't listen to him. Enough
of these first moments, the journey is begun, Eurydice is
on her way into the light. She has only to keep coming
on. Keep coming on my little one. Come here to me.
Touch me. Feel my skin. Smell my sweat. It's different to
Dorelia's but ah just smell it. Here take my hand again.
Put your fingertips onto mine. Stroke my palm. Dig your
nails into it. Kiss it, lick it. What does it taste like?**

And when Rilke interrupts this attempt to distract Gwen with an account of

Rodin's art:

It's the character of the surfaces, more or less in contrast to the contour, that which fills out all the contours. It is the law and the relationship of these surfaces....

Rodin silences him with a cruel reference to Rilke's own physical condition, his precarious ill health:

Shut up Stop your talking, we're feeling here. We're knowing our bodies. Feeling is what you do with your fingers. Feeling is pressing and pinching and slapping. Feeling is mouth to mouth and when you bite it hurts you ...or someone else. Feeling is when your blood flows and you see it wasted on the floor.

But Rodin's awakening of Gwen's sexuality:

Full as a fruit with sweetness and darkness. I have opened to you. I'm the softest clay – any touch marks me. I'm forming differently.

is met with a response which outreaches his sexual capabilities. It is useful here to introduce Irigaray who looks to myth for some kind of genealogy, some pre-history for women. In her search she identifies mythic figures such as Antigone, Clytemnestra, Ariadne and Persephone. Females who have an excess, a surplus that extends beyond their patriarchal context. In *Tracings*, Gwen as Eurydice (Persephone) forms part of this tradition and this is underlined when Rodin excuses the reduction in his sexual ability and appetite, blaming it on his age:

RODIN I'm tired.

GWEN What are you saying? A year ago we did it once, twice, again and again, until I could hardly stand.

RODIN That was a year ago, I'm a year older now.

Despite these excuses, Gwen interprets Rodin's sexual unwillingness as a rejection. The loss of this physical expression of affection is so painful that she is susceptible to Rilke's interpretation of Eurydice. She is tempted by Eurydice's response to the possibility of remaining in the darkness:

RILKE *Even now she was no longer that fair woman
who'd sometimes echoed in the poet's poems,
no longer the wide couch's scent and island,
nor yonder man's possession any longer.*

*She was already loosened like long hair,
and given far and wide like fallen rain,
and dealt out like a manifold supply.*

She was already root.

GWEN She's still in the underworld?

RILKE Hermes is leading her out, but she's changed – in her heart she's given herself up to the dark world.

In this retracing, however, Gwen has the strength to resist the temptation to become completely resigned to the underworld and as Rodin continues to reject her, she attempts to find solace in her work, in her art, in what Cixous would describe as 'her writing'.

*When the axis of a sitting trunk is vertical, the weight of the head and trunk rests on the pelvis and the muscles of the back prevent the trunk from falling forwards.
I try to understand and then show it. I draw it once, but my hand.....shakes too violently, I draw it again and my tears....*

RODIN SPITS AT HIS MAQUETTE, RILKE GASPS, GWEN SOBS.

For many women, mythical female figures seem to offer some bridge between artistic and personal life, between the biographical and 'writing', providing what Rachael Blau duPlessis describes as,

"textual" heras: Arachne, challenging even the goddess with her weaving which depicts the rapes of women by gods. Philomel, muted, mutilated, weaving the depiction of her rape and mutilation; Procne, the reader. Penelope, buying time for personal loyalties and choices with the studied, strategic destruction and remaking of her weaving. Names, identified as constructive agents, figures who make and unmake texts, or, to use an old-fashioned word, works. Who are workers in "writing"
(DuPlessis, 1990. p10)

It is also useful to mention again here Claire MacDonald who, in her biographical piece in Pores 3, links a moment of crisis in her writing with the myth of Eurydice and also Kathy Acker's essay 'Eurydice in the Underworld' written in the months before her death in 1997. In a series of monologues and dialogues attributed to Orpheus and Eurydice, Acker 'through writes' her cancer diagnosis and treatment.

But it would appear that Gwen is, as yet, unable to use either her role as Eurydice or her writing equivalent – her painting – in this way. I find some explanation for her failure in Kristeva's writings on depression and melancholia. In *Black Sun* (Kristeva, 1989), Kristeva makes links between creativity, depression and melancholia, suggesting that, in making art, we deplete our resources and the act of making art is effectively a revisiting, a re-iteration of the initial experience of loss. She sees creativity as a moment of

resistance, a way of revisiting¹⁴⁷ (through signs) what we lose by our inevitable entry into the symbolic. In Gwen's case painting *could* provide her with a metaphorical resistance to negative aspects of socialization and enculturement.

In the fourth movement of *Tracings*, we are witness to another profound loss for Gwen. Rilke's poem has progressed:

*She had attained a new virginity
and was intangible; her sex had closed
like a young flower at the approach of evening,
and her pale hands had grown so disaccustomed
to being a wife, that even the slim god's
endless gentle contact as he led her
repelled her like too great an intimacy.*

and with it the fate of Orpheus and Eurydice. Rodin's death is interpreted through the myth, through the loss contained in the moment of turning.

Eurydice, in the form of Gwen makes every effort to save him and even when Rilke re-emphasizes the reasons for Eurydice's lack of concern, continues to fight against her fate:

RILKE But Eurydice doesn't care – she's gone past wanting, past longing.

GWEN I care – I want....I'll endure anything.....**TO RODIN**
Don't turn, don't condemn me.

But despite her efforts, the fifth movement finds her back in the underworld

GWEN Dark – completely, utterly – thick and heavy, lidless
sightless, foetid, pressing down on me.
Such a dark place.

I refer to Kristeva again in an effort to understand Gwen's refusal to

¹⁴⁷ These theories of Kristeva's on re-iteration, of loss through making art also contribute to the choice of the revisiting form for *Tracings*.

accept the death and consequent loss of Rodin and Rilke. Kristeva draws a contrast between the mourning subject and the melancholic. The mourning subject is prepared to use language, to subscribe to the symbolic in order to name and come to terms with loss. Acker also makes her character Eurydice comment on this act of 'naming':

I was dreaming myself, and maybe something also, maybe me,
something at the moment I didn't know, because I hadn't named.
(Acker, 1997 p22)

We have already observed Gwen's inability or resistance to this potential course of action. She conforms to Kristeva's description of the melancholic, who rejects these possibilities, holding on to those feelings and emotions which he or she would claim to be outside the encoding possibilities of the symbolic. The melancholic refuses to separate themselves from the object of desire. Dani Cavallaro gives an illuminating account of the effects of this strategy:

This move is simultaneously cannibalistic and self-destructive for, in incorporating the other, the subject also creates conflicts and divisions within its own ego; it becomes alienated from itself... Indeed, we can only interact with others if we are aware of our separateness from them. In melancholia, relatedly, we are unable to mourn: we pine over a lack that cannot be symbolized, cannot be given a name. Therefore, this condition involves a total devaluation of social bond and of language, whereby *everything becomes meaningless*. (Cavallaro, 2003 p131)

This melancholic inability to mourn does, however, mean that Gwen is still not as fully resigned as Eurydice, still resistant:

**If we can hold it – just for a little longer.
Winding through the darkness – no arrival – still
journeying. Eurydice and Hermes. Again Rilke.**

and trying to enlist Rilke's help. However, Rilke's health is failing:

My blood is drying into blocks of porphory, red as hell. I feel the landscape of my mind in my veins. Here look at my arm – like a dead twig and my fingers – look – just dry sticks.

and even those defences, solaces, means of salvation provided by art have died with Orpheus:

RILKE SINGING What is life if thou art dead? ...art dead....?

Rilke has become at one with the notion that to live you must first embrace death. It is his version of Eurydice's philosophy and, to Gwen's great irony, he demonstrates his surrender to the idea by becoming Eurydice:

RILKE SPREADING ARMS I feel so light. **CIRCLING** A loss of blood, a space inside – emptiness at last. I'm emptied out.

GWEN WEARY Just like Eurydice.

RILKE Yes, finally there's nothing and I can embrace death.

GWEN Just like Eurydice.

RILKE Full as a fruit with sweetness and with darkness was she with her great death.

The sixth movement introduces Vera.

We thus find sacrifice and art, face to face, representing the two aspects of the thetic function; the prohibition of jouissance by language and the introduction of jouissance into and through language. Religion seizes this first aspect, necessary to the institution of the symbolic order. First myth and then science seek to justify it by elaborating a complex system of relations and mediations, even though the very fact that the latter are produced, vary, and change, refutes their claim that language prohibits jouissance. On the other hand, poetry, music, dance, theatre – "art" – point *at once* to a pole opposite that of religious prohibition. One

may say, in this sense that they know more about it than it does. Far from denying the thetic, which through the ages religion has assigned itself the privilege of celebrating – though only as a prohibition – art accepts the thetic break to the extent that it resists becoming either delirium or a fusion with nature. Nevertheless, through this break, art takes from ritual space what theology conceals: trans-symbolic jouissance, the irruption of the motility threatening the unity of the social realm and the subject. (Kristeva, 1989 p80)

Vera confirms Irigaray's claims that Persephone (Eurydice) is only partially captured by patriarchy in the form of the underworld. Persephone remains her mother's daughter as well as her husband's wife. She is pure dissimulation, divided between two worlds and two lovers.

Harmony, in itself, in her, ceaselessly recrosses the limit from the outside to the inside of the one. It/she always brings together at least two. Not two unities, but a two, which passes from the interior to the exterior, from the exterior to the interior of the ones, and without a break. (Irigaray, 1983 p116)

Meeting Vera, Gwen is resistant to this last opportunity for life and love.

Love! LAUGHS HARSHLY Please.... spare me that.

She seems to have finally become Eurydice. However, faced with an ultimate version of self sacrifice in the Christianity of Vera, Gwen rallies:

Dear God she reminds me of.... a moment... before Rodin – a moment above ground, when I was young and vigorous and full of desire – a moment of possibility. She reminds me of that moment and suddenly this one is untenable – absolutely.... I can't hold it.... I can't live it – live in this underworld, in this dark landscape of suffering. I want to go back.... just once again. For the last time. Just once more to be above ground in a world of sun bleached grasses and eye splitting skies. To walk the lanes hand in hand, to sleep by the river on the slanting stones under the overhanging trees. Shall we Vera? Shall we my darling girl?

This attempt is couched in terms of a choice between two main preoccupations of the play. The first is a concern with held moments, with the possibility of remaining. It equates with the proposition as described by Cixous and already mentioned above – the idea that Eurydice can provide a solution because she is always already lost and therefore, 'she is at the locus of separation, without possibility for reparation.' But this question of remaining is not unproblematic, as Cixous discusses in 'The School of the Dead' (1993) when writing about Tchoukovskaia's grief.

Not dying, living after the other, "remaining," is also an intolerable experience. It is at this point that we feel, though we can do nothing about it, that there may be the unpardonable in ourselves [...] All great texts are prey to the question: who is killing me? Whom am I giving myself to kill?
(Cixous, 1993 p15)

A second concern of the play is the potential for revelation achieved through repetition and revisiting, the inherent qualities of 'retracement'.

Tragically, Gwen's attempts to revisit some kind of unity, an attempt in which she harnesses 'art' as 'a pole opposite that of religious prohibition' (Kristeva, 1989 p80), founder on Vera's determined and simplistic piety:

GWEN God's love or friendship – unselfish love. I prefer the selfish kind. Rilke wrote a poem to a wife he couldn't touch and I've drawn a woman I can't touch – not deeply – I couldn't make you suffer.

VERA Why would you want to?

GWEN Because love is suffering.
Rodin taught me that and Rilke.

VERA They were wrong.

GWEN **Were they? Isn't that what your God teaches too?
"By his suffering, through his love..."**

VERA **Yes, but he's talking about sacrifice, about service.**

GWEN **Oh, we're back to that again.**

VERA **I wish you would listen to me Gwen.**

GWEN **And I wish you would listen to me. Orpheus emerged out
of Hades into a world that couldn't hear his music...And
Eurydice is not out of Hell yet.**

VERA **I shall pray for you.**

GWEN **I shall pray too.
GWEN STARTS TO DRAW AGAIN**

As Vera makes this imprecation to prayer, Gwen realises where her loyalties and salvation lie. She chooses secular, earthly pleasures and a form of suffering that heightens life rather than replacing it. Robert Semper's comments on the work of David Wojnarowicz are useful here:

...in Freud's words, "a deference for reality gains the day", he has moved into the phantasmatic world of the mourning ego and the lost object – he has also quite literally, positioned himself for death.
(Semper in Phelan and Lane, 1998 p44)

In these final moments the retracing motif of the play finds its meaning in Gwen's repeated learning:

**Some people keep on learning. The same wound re-
opened until it is etched into their skin. Again, again.
Until it'll never heal without leaving a mark – a scar.
They sit in front of a mirror and draw blood – draw and
draw – the same face, the same suffering. But perhaps at
last I have drawn it out of myself.**

and by her acceptance of the fact that there is an inevitable moment when

these lessons become part of the past:

**Women seduced by each other's sensuality, drugged by
each other's scent, entranced to see their own desirability
in the other – like in a mirror. Yes, I remember that
moment. How it was with Dorelia.
But this moment is different and even as I speak it's gone
– into the past.**

Semper again:

Given the temporal structure of mourning, this is also a move into
the past, establishing a Janus-like perception over time.
(Semper in Phelan and Lane, 1999 p44)

In the final seventh movement Gwen uses the poem to make a final
retracing, a final acknowledgement of her moment of understanding, of her
full acceptance of the role of Eurydice and what that represents.

**But don't mourn for me. Don't make me go back.
I have retraced... gone over.... I have reworked, redrawn.
Again and again until the line has become thick, the
paper sodden with tears. Until it has fallen to pieces in
my hands and I'm left with HOLDS OUT EMPTY
HANDS this moment, this moment. When there's no one
left.
And it's the best moment because there's nothing to fear,
because I'm empty, emptied out, and light. So very light.
Like Rilke I'm lighter than life.
I'm Eurydice at last and at the end of my poem.**

Beginning again

Then also there is the important question of repetition and is there any such thing. Is there repetition or is there insistence?

(Stein (1930) 1967 p100)

Beginning again and again is a natural thing even when there is a series. Beginning again and again and again explaining composition and time is a natural thing. It is understood by this time that everything is the same except composition and time, composition and the time of the composition and the time in the composition. Everything is the same except composition and as the composition is different and always going to be different everything is not the same. Everything is not the same as the time when of the composition and the time in the composition is different. The composition is different, that is certain. The composition is the thing seen by every one living in the living they are doing, they are the composing of the composition that at the time they are living in the composition of the time in which they are living. It is that that makes living a thing they are doing. Nothing else is different, of that almost any one can be certain. The time when and the time of and the time in that composition is the natural phenomena of that composition and of that perhaps every one can be certain.¹⁴⁸ (Stein (1926) 1967 pp23-24)

Tracings is composed as a series of movements. This form is analogous to the movements of a symphony, where the central theme is revisited with variations. The symphonic form of the first three movements revisits the beginning of Rilke's poem and the beginning of the relationship between Rodin and Gwen.

The play takes place in the 'real time' of Rilke's composition of the poem, though this is disrupted by requests to 'go back' when he is required to re-write what the audience knows he has already written.

¹⁴⁸ First delivered by the author as a lecture at Cambridge and Oxford, this essay was first published by the Hogarth Press in London in 1926 and revived in the volume called *What Are Masterpieces?*

The revisiting/retracing motif of the play is not abandoned after the first three movements, but is extended throughout the play. For instance, in her attempt to halt Rodin's decline into illness and death, Gwen reminds him of their first meeting, referring to the warming of her hands. This appears in the First Movement as:

RODIN **TO GWEN** There you see, now we're like two friends sitting round the fire. Give me your hand. It's so cold! And now you see we're such friends that we hold hands together. Such friends that I warm them like this.... **BLOWS THEN RUBS** and like that **KISSES** and that.... there...

And is revisited in the Fourth Movement:

GWEN **STARTS LICKING HIS HAND** Let me warm you. **RUBS HAND THEN BLOWS ON IT**
Do you remember this?
RUBS THEN KISSES HAND And that?
How you warmed me?

Gwen then enacts another revisiting when she reminds him of the words she used to tempt him, to persuade him to go back to the first moment of their meeting. Here is the initial temptation at the end of the first movement:

GWEN When we were younger.

RODIN Younger, ah yes – a temptation hard to resist – to be young and vigorous again – to have the strength in my hands and arms – to be driven to act on my desires – to have desires – to be young again...

This is revisited at the end of the second movement when persuading Rodin to begin again:

GWEN Again. **TO RODIN** Younger again.

And here she refers to both these instances in the Fourth Movement :

GWEN Young again remember...young and vigorous...

Gwen also adds to her armoury of persuasion, a reminder of Rodin's past desire:

**GWEN PUTS HIS HAND BETWEEN HER LEGS
 ...and full of desire...**

In a subtler ruse Gwen then goes on to use Rodin's own methods of seduction, calling on the strategic references to her cat that he makes in the third movement:

**RODIN: Your friend. Your little wild cat is a friend, like me.
 You feel natural together.**

Gwen reintroduces this cat in the Fourth Movement as a way of confirming her ability to 'save' Rodin:

**GWEN GOES BACK TO HIS HAND AND RUBS AND
 LICKS IT. There – like a little cat. TAKES HIS
 HAND AND PUTS IT ON HER CHEEK Stroke
 me. Yes – and again**

She goes on to press for another re-iteration, another tracing, another movement in pursuit of what Gertrude Stein has described as 'the continuous present' (Stein (1926) 1967 p25).

GWEN Another moment – just one more.

It is at this point that Gwen, in her desperation, requests the aid of writing to facilitate this maintenance of the presence of Rodin, to enable his continuous being. As in previous movements she calls on Rilke, on his 'poetic writing' to allow this:

GWEN: Again Rilke, from the beginning.

In the Sixth Movement the arrival of Vera brings about a sequence of revisiting that is characterised by Gwen's appropriation of Rodin's modes of address. When Gwen asks Vera to pose for her, she revisits the seductive approach used by Rodin on their first meeting. She ironically suggests that this might be appropriate because Vera requires a similar kind of relationship to that proposed by Rodin in the later stages of their liaison. This was a time when he attempted to shift the nature of their relationship from an affair to a friendship

GWEN You could be my model – I'm tired of drawing myself. You could pose for me.

VERA I've never....

GWEN It's the kind of thing *friends* do for each other isn't it?

The stage directions also underline the similarity between the two moments of invitation when they require Vera to take up a pose previously adopted by Gwen:

VERA CLIMBS UP ONTO THE PLINTH POSING AS GWEN DID FOR RODIN IN THE OPENING SCENE. SLIDE OF GWEN NAKED TO WAIST POSING.

As soon as Vera is in pose, Gwen takes up Rodin's role, re-iterating the exact form of words he used to address her at the beginning of the third movement:

GWEN You look much younger. You have an innocent face and yet.... Lean forwards a little – why do you sit like that? So upright – like a good child waiting....for what? What is about to happen to you I wonder?

When Gwen becomes the seducer we understand her sexual maturity. If, in the early stages of *Tracings*, she is seen as passively in receipt of Rodin's advances, here is a moment when she appears to seek power. She has of course attempted this before in the later stages of her relationship with Rodin:

GWEN Where shall we do it?

RODIN It's late.

GWEN Here on the floor?

RODIN **LAUGHS** Any scrap of carpet, any dirty floor board.

GWEN Here – on the couch?

RODIN The concierge.

GWEN Behind the door then.

RODIN Insatiable.

GWEN Insatiable – loosened, utterly, strips of hair and clothes and flesh. Here, here.

RODIN I'm tired.

GWEN What are you saying? A year ago we did it once, twice, again and again, until I could hardly stand.

RODIN That was a year ago, I'm a year older now.

GWEN Not in your heart, not inside.

RODIN **Inside, outside, both. When you're my age you'll know. I'm old Gwen and I'm ill.**

GWEN **No.**

RODIN **You wear me out.**

GWEN **No.**

RODIN **It's cold in here.**

GWEN **Give me your hand – yes it is cold. Let me kiss it and put it back here. BETWEEN LEGS. That'll warm you.**

RODIN **Not enough. I want to go to bed.**

GWEN **Yes, yes, I'll make your bed.**

RODIN **My wife has already made it.**

However, these advances were unsuccessful, Rodin did not take her seriously. Now the adoption of his actual words is a direct attempt to appropriate his power. Unfortunately, Vera is not Gwen, she responds very differently. When Gwen repeats Rodin's question, asking what makes Vera happy:

GWEN **What does make you happy Vera?**

VERA **Oh just simple things.**

GWEN **Like those flowers that grow in the cracks of walls?**

their interaction proceeds differently and ends with Vera patronising Gwen:

VERA **I want to transplant them into some rich soil – so they can really bloom.**

GWEN **And the trees that shade the paths of the Luxembourg gardens?**

VERA Too shady – they need a good prune.

GWEN I've slept under the trees in the
Luxembourg Gardens.

VERA Oh my dear – how very sad.

Nevertheless, in a section that follows, taken verbatim from one of Vera's letters¹⁴⁹, we understand that, despite her patronising tone, she has some genuine concern for Gwen:

VERA I found her intense but vulnerable. A combination which tugged at my heart. As did her loneliness which she carried about with her, which she used as a protection against the world – against me who only wanted to be her friend.

In the spirit of this, Vera returns to her pose and the development of their conversation reverts to a version of Gwen's interaction with Rodin in Movement Four. Here is the section between Vera and Gwen:

VERA But the trees in the Bois de Boulogne...

GWEN Are they to your taste?

VERA They're wilder, more natural.

GWEN More natural, I knew it. You love simple, natural things but if they're wild too...well...that's more exciting isn't it? And you can't resist... perhaps... the thought, just the chance that... at any moment..

VERA The wind was so wild the other night. I could see the tossing trees from my window; I could hear the branches breaking.

And here Gwen speaks to Rodin:

¹⁴⁹ Transcribed from the original at the Gwen John Archive, National Library of Wales.

GWEN: The trees in the Bois de Boulogne....

RODIN: Are of course, much more to your taste.

GWEN: They're wilder, more natural.

RODIN: More natural, I knew it. You love simple, natural things but if they're wild too...well...that's more exciting isn't it? And you can't resist... perhaps... the thought, just the chance that... at any moment..

GWEN: The wind was so wild the other night. I could see the tossing trees from my window; I could hear the branches breaking.

But these similarities do not last, and Gwen's attempts eventually founder:

RODIN Your window was open? Weren't you afraid? Didn't you close it?

GWEN No, I left it open for my cat – she's half wild you see....

compared with:

GWEN Your window was open?

VERA To freshen my room.

When despite these setbacks, Gwen continues to try and develop their intimacy, Vera draws conclusions that Gwen goes on to confirm when she makes clear the similarity between her feeling for Vera and her feelings for Dorelia. Again Gwen revisits earlier text to underline these similarities:

Dear God she reminds me of.... a moment... before Rodin – a moment above ground, when I was young and vigorous and full of desire – a moment of possibility. She reminds me of that moment and suddenly this one is untenable – absolutely....

**I can't hold it.... I can't live it – live in this
underworld, in this dark landscape of suffering. I
want to go back.... just once again. For the last
time. Just once more to be above ground in a
world of sunbleached grasses and eye splitting
skies. To walk the lanes hand in hand, to sleep by
the river on the slanting stones under the
overhanging trees. Shall we Vera? Shall we my
darling girl?**

But if Gwen's relationship with Dorelia remained unconsummated or unfulfilled, we understand that the sexually mature Gwen at the end of *Tracings* is 'formed differently', she has learned from Rodin and now wishes to not only instigate but also fully exploit possibilities. In the section before the First Movement, when Rodin suggests that Gwen might bite Dorelia's neck, she is shocked:

**GWEN Then I turn.... and look at Dorelia. The line of her
neck echoes the line on my paper. It's just as
perfect and just as beautiful.**

RODIN Embarrassingly beautiful.

GWEN I want...

RODIN to bite it?

**RODIN SPITS AGAIN AT THE CLAY.
GWEN AND RILKE FLINCH.**

GWEN No!

But in this last movement Gwen shows herself capable of such an action:

**LOWERS VOICE TO A WHISPER
but this time the peach juice runs into my mouth
and....MUTTERS.... tastes sweet as her sweat.**

Throughout these sections, revisiting and re-iteration are used to demonstrate the shift in Gwen's attitude. However, her inability to succeed using tactics which suggest that power is so directly related to sexuality, are simultaneously a critique of such strategies.

The fact that such attitudes are seen to fail in a relationship between two women could be seen to be significant, a comment perhaps on the more egalitarian nature of single sex relationships. But as author of the play I suggest that a potential for this reading emerges out of my fidelity to the recorded facts of Gwen's life. The concern for me, as a writer, lay in the cyclical nature of Gwen's attempts to form intimate relationships with either men or women, and her arrival at a point where these revisited failures provided a context where acceptance of solitude was possible. It is this preoccupation that lies behind the title and the form of the piece.

Last Words

My last words have their preface in the discussion of myth and grief contained in the previous section, 'Tracings'. 'Last Words' is a further exploration of the mourning subject and provides a set of reflections on the relationship between my writing and that subject. I take as its background Cixous' and Kristeva's theories on creativity, death and mourning, but place these within an autobiographical context. In this way my conclusion provides a final demonstration of the reflexivity of my process and the autobiographical context of this enquiry.

My decision to end in this way comes after a year of considering various ways of concluding my project. Whilst undertaking recent revisions, I have repeatedly asked myself how I might successfully draw the various strands together and make final comment on their overall thesis. As well as the usual difficulties of this activity, the exercise has been further complicated by the fact that, throughout my studies, I have experienced a tension between my methodology of 'writing through' and the doctoral process. I have often questioned whether the necessary requirements of an examined outcome militate against my pursuit of this strategy.

Predictably, this tension has come to a head at this moment, when I am required to assemble my final thoughts. It has brought under scrutiny the various conventions available to me at this stage. For instance there is the

possibility of identifying and revisiting the various questions embedded in my thesis and providing well-argued, definitive answers.

However, that would imply that this exercise has been, in some fundamental way, about finding these definitive answers, whereas, in effect, I have experienced it as a process of discovering the appropriate questions. In the section, 'What is it you wish to speak of?', I asked one question and then examined both the question and its answers to ascertain what further questions these revealed. All the other sections took their lead from the methodology of this early enquiry. As I explain in my introduction, 'What am I speaking of?' became an investigative frame, an overall question for each subsequent section.

Another way of concluding this thesis might be to arrive at a final, personal definition of a female voice, adding my new descriptor to those already in operation. The problem here is my belief that, central to the notion of the female voice, is its crucial indefinability. It could be argued that any attempt to provide definitive descriptors would succumb to systems and criteria that are simply not applicable, that emerge out of phallo-centric models, that run contrary to notions of jouissance, plurality, porosity and poly-valency, that can only emerge out of a relationship with the symbolic and deny the more sympathetic criteria of the semiotic (in Kristeva's sense of the term). These difficulties of definition would seem to be confirmed by the current availability of such a wide range of possibilities, many of which I have already listed in this thesis. Writers like Rachael Blau DuPlessis have provided us with many

examples. In the quotation below, her harnessing of linguistic gymnastics may be exhilarating but it also underlines the essential difficulty of this exercise.

I am writing the voice, a voice, one bricolaging, teasing voice of a working. A raw exhilaration. At ruptures. At relativizing the "universal." At creolizing the "metropole." At writing a feminist-feminine-female bolus of scrapping and loving orts into existence.
(DuPlessis, 1990 p173)

When DuPlessis answers her own question, asking whether the female aesthetic is simply 'an enabling myth', she appears to be partially contradicting the above description of 'the voice'/'a voice':

And as such, these differing experiences do surely produce (some) different consciousness, different cultural expression, different relations to realms of symbols and symbol users. Different "language", metaphorical, different uses of the grammatical and expressive resources of language [...] And therefore there is female aesthetic, but not a female aesthetic, not one constellation of strategies.' (DuPlessis, 1990 p3)

However, this second, rather more measured opinion is one that comes closer to my own position and it could, therefore, inform any attempts I might make to construct a 'new definition'.

Another method of arriving at this definition might be to draw together all the various strands of my enquiry into an interwoven and integrated justification for their combined presence and their particular contribution to new knowledge. As the creation of 'new knowledge' is part of the overall requirement of doctorate-level study, this would seem to be not only a viable solution, but also a sensible one. And here I take my doctorate (life) in my hands as I begin to argue my own version of this premise. I start with my grandfather who was a great gambler and although it was observable, even to

me as a young child, that this strategy had not eventually stood him in good stead – he spent the last few years of his life sitting in a council house, exacerbating his chronic bronchitis with heavy smoking – nevertheless, he passed on to me an irresistible affection for risk and its employment at the most crucial moments. To cut an anecdotal preamble short (whilst acknowledging that such diversionary tactics are the staple strategies of risk takers) I would want, in this practice-based PhD, to direct the reader to find this new knowledge in my original writings.¹⁵⁰ In them I, as an epistemological subject, 'write through' in an activity concerned with opening up the possibility of new knowledge. Any potential originality is, therefore, located in this writing and, through the commentaries, its contribution to a wider understanding of women's writing in general.

Having discussed each of these conventions, I should also make clear that I understand how a good comprehensive conclusion might well embrace not just one of these possibilities, but a combination of them all.

In the end (sic), however, I have decided that the conclusion that needs to be fully argued is one that justifies the autobiographical nature of this investigation.

Every time I began to consider how to finish this project, I was confronted by another much more significant ending, a personal event that has overshadowed a major part of its production.

¹⁵⁰ I also make this claim at the beginning of my thesis in 'Opening Words' p1.

On the 27th of May 2005, two months after her 80th birthday, my mother died suddenly and without warning. This profound shock both interrupted this work and also altered its context, because it irrevocably altered me. So I have decided that, in conclusion, I should write my conclusion 'through writing' of my mother's death.

My preoccupation with grief is well documented in this thesis. An exploration of its manifestation in writing and performance has dominated my work over many years.

Cixous initially stimulated this interest and in particular I was impressed by her observations in *The School of the Dead*, where she describes writing as a way of 'learning to die' (Cixous, 1993 p13). In this and other writings, Cixous makes links between writing and death. She believes the latter is a necessary precursor to both living and writing and she is also clear about the importance of our relationship with the dead and the role that writing has in our understanding of this crucial relationship.

In 'The/My Female Voice' I give some attention to my interest in grief, citing several pieces of work where it is clearly a preoccupation. Each of these considers a different aspect of grief and these investigations accumulate to form a layered set of reflections on the subject. For instance when writing about my deceased father, in *Sleeping Dogs* and *driving home*, I draw parallels between my father's secrecy and the fluidity of my identity.

...the evidence is before you members of the jury in black and white, or rather lacily pierced through by sun falling onto the cast iron

table top, giving the birth and marriage certificates a lyrical feel, even though they contain the boxed evidence of his lies – doctored ages, names and partners
(driving home, p62)

The shifting sand of his past life, the variety of selves he constructed and maintained, influence and confirm my own sense of multiple identity and fuel my distrust of memory and claims to truth.

In the head wrapping¹⁵¹ and improvised vocal calling of *Seven Days and Seven Nights of Mourning*, a woman's public, durational performance of grief exploits physical objects and their ritual use in relation to the body and language.

**The wind eats my breath
Scours my throat
And sucks out the tongue of my mourning**
(Script, *Seven Days and Seven Nights of Mourning*)

This ritual aspect of grief is present too in the objects and activities of *Material Evidence*, where the political nature of women's relationship with grief is sewn into their acts of production.

NARRATOR: Do you find them seductive these tantalising cygnets? Be careful their needles do not grow and their stitches become purl and plain. Then they will take their place at the bottom of the guillotine. And then will they horrify you? Will their absorption in their task become a symbol of cruelty and indifference? Why? Because they are women, or because they knit? I think they pause and look up (WOMEN SEWING LOOK UP AT THE NARRATOR) when the blade falls. I think they knit the ghastly image tightly into their work and thus into their minds. So they know fully and are not just passive witnesses, but active participants in this revolution.

¹⁵¹ See description of this performance on p49.

Similarly in *America! America!* I personalize national and global grief through a single woman's moment-by-moment, ravishing descent into death.

Sleep, I must sleep. It's warm as blood down here and the dust is too soft; my cheek can no longer resist it's pillowy charm. I look at my porcelain white hand. One finger is lifted and seems so lonely I wish I could take it in my mouth and lick it clean and kiss it. My thigh too I would love to stroke back into feeling. But I'm so warm and sleepy my longings are distant, like that slow thudding which could be my own heartbeat, or... perhaps... someone... somebody pounding above?

And in its sequel *A Looped Footage*, a woman's everyday life is juxtaposed with the unfolding events of the Iraq war. The progression of death in this conflict is described alongside the progression of infection in one of her teeth and an account of its eventual extraction.

My exploration of suicide in *Friends* owes much to previous research (for a radio play) on Sylvia Plath. In *Friends* I am concerned with the notion that one can develop a relationship with suicide and death, that, in difficult circumstances, it can become a comforting friend or lover.

Friends? Well of course I have friends. There's suicide for instance. Suicide is my companion and my consolation. It's at the back of my mind like a tin of corned beef kept in the larder just in case. Suicide helps me to bear this present by giving me a future, something I can look forward to and trust.

In contrast, in the play *Tracings*, I am more concerned with how myth is part of a culture's historical communication of the qualities and experience of

¹⁵² See also section on *Material Evidence* pp43-48.

grief. How, for many women, myth carries behavioural patterning, passing it down through the generations.

GWENI know what's going to happen, Orpheus is going to turn and then Eurydice will have to go back into the darkness. He loses faith and she's condemned to suffer. It's too familiar.

This text also provides an exploration of Rilke's philosophical position on life death and grief:

RILKE Death will have its own beauty.... rocks and ghostly forests. Bridges over voidness. And I will approach them – my steps encircled by the clinging grave clothes. I will enter emptiness so lightly, floating over the void, I will see nothing and hear nothing. I will want nothing. I'm almost at the end, at the end of longing...and that.... is the beginning of everything.

It is one that resonates with Cixous' approach and Rilke's attitude to grief substantially defining my attitude towards life, death and writing and providing a philosophical context for one of my most recent and most developed explorations of grief. This is undertaken in *Bodywork*¹⁵³ my digital film adaptation of Don DeLillo's novella, *The Body Artist* (DeLillo, 2001).

**on the fifth day I started the real bodywork
breathing exercises – breathe in, breathe out
it was helping me to live again
to live even though the world was lost inside me**
(Script *Bodywork* Appendix Five ppcxxxii-xxxiii)

In DeLillo's text the central female character (the body artist) loses her partner when he commits suicide. After the event she returns to their former home and embarks on a ritual cleansing of the house, followed by a rigorous

¹⁵³ DVD and script in Appendix Five.

regime of exercise, which extends and tests her physical strength, stamina and resolve.

There were always states to reach that surpassed previous extremes. I measured the unendurable by breath, or strength, or length of time, or force of will, then I extended the limit.

(Script *Bodywork*, Appendix Five, pcxxxiii)

Discovering that this does not rid her of the haunting presence of her former lover, or of her sense of guilt, she begins a ritual of self-cleansing.

....it was time to sand my body.

I used a pumice stone on the bottoms of my feet.

I worked on a small callous, stretching the task over days, lost in it.

I wanted to become blankness a body slate erased of every past resemblance.

(Script *Bodywork*, Appendix Five, ppcxxxiii-cxxxiv)

In *Bodywork* the central character embodies grief as part of a process of transcending it. In the making of the digital film, I employed this strategy of embodiment alongside strategies of improvisation designed to find physical and vocal expression appropriate to the process of grieving.

What happens outside happens inside. I myself am the earth, everything that happens, the lives that live me in my different forms, the voyage, the voyager, the body of travel and the spirit of travel, and all of this with such suppleness that I go in and out, in and out, I am in my body and my body is in me. I envelop myself and contain myself, we might be afraid of getting lost but it never happens, one of my lives always brings me back to solid body. (Cixous (1977) 1991 p47)

....my bodywork made everything transparent

(Script *Bodywork*, Appendix Five, pcxxxiii)

Re-watching this film, I am always captured by the relationship between the spoken text and the images of a woman's body 'working'. In *Bodywork* and in *Tracings*, I thought I had 'written through' grief to a point of understanding.

And these accounts of my work on grief, might suggest that I had, in readerly and writerly ways, prepared myself for my mother's death. However, this was not the case. I was not prepared for the grief that followed her sudden death. My emotion entirely and shockingly surpassed any understanding.

In a joint conversation between Dodie Bellamy, C. A. Conrad, Christina Strong, and Erica Kaufman in June, 2007 for *Philly Sound New Poetry*, Bellamy says: 'There's a big difference to being open to something/someone and claiming to "understand" them. Understanding is a colonizing position, always reeking of ownership'. I had not been open to grief, nothing had prepared me for its actuality, I did not, in any meaningful way, know anything about it.

It is also significant that the writing that followed, that was undertaken as I was emotionally overtaken, could not be categorized as yet another attempt to understand. It was rather an example of 'writing through' – a writing activity more usefully described as one of opening up, of coming to terms, of setting aside resistance. It was a processing activity that produced a sequence of seven poems.

I wrote these poems in the months following my mother's death. I began them shortly after my sister and I spent a week clearing my mother's house. If I were to be honest about my primary motivation for writing them, I would say that I wanted, in some way, to record. I knew the house would be sold, that many of the possessions would never be seen again, that I would never walk up the gravel path, knock on the door, stroll the garden, or sleep in the beds. The

loss of these objects and places contained the loss of my mother and also my guilt for the little time I had spent with her in her home. However, my motivation, described in this way, is observably at odds with my understanding and appreciation of the notion of *écriture* as opposed to *écriture*. The writing process, however, was not. During the course of it I was constantly surprised, initially by my choice of medium. I do not consider myself a poet and have not written anything I would seriously categorise as poetry since my twenties. In this medium I was an amateur, stripped of many of my familiar writing skills. The rawness of my emotion seemed to demand this, to require that I was not able to fall back on well-used methods, shortcuts or tropes. It also ensured that I was not able to anticipate an outcome that would have any external currency, would be 'of value' in any context, except a personal one.

In the process that follows, I am taking a very recent personal event and evidencing its writing outcomes. The original writing responds to an ending and my reflexive, practice-based methodology uses my response to one ending to provide a writerly solution to another situation in which an ending is required. Original writing responding to a personal conclusion acts as a concluding element in my research.

I have already described the poems as an attempt to memorialise objects and events. My doctorate is also engaged with this process in relation to my body of writing. My writing (and complicitly I) is/am its subject, just as my mother is the subject of these poems.

Mother I

Abandoned by the dead ones,
my mother and others,
I fall back
over and over,
a landed fish,
gasping.

There's a smell of wet leaves in this room.
It's dark in here
and nothing moves.
Scales litter the floor.
A fish eye view
of tables and torn photographs.

Here's Hull docks,
Hessle Bank
and Humberside.

The tide's out,
the mud's in.
Damp silt,
sodden shale
and everywhere,
lost in air,
the silver fish are drowning.

In this first poem, I move between inside and outside, when I bring the external context of East Riding (as it was called in my childhood) into the internal, dark room of my bereavement. A reversal of this mechanism, a shift from inside to outside, is also part of the process of using autobiographical material in my doctoral research. When the personal is trawled and cited in this way, it is drawn into a different relationship to the world and the self. In order to develop this observation further, I focus on the third stanza of *Mother I*.

Here's Hull docks,
Hessle Bank
And Humberside.

In Hull dialect, 'h' is either omitted all together or given particular emphasis. Sometimes this relies on which vowel the letter 'h' precedes or what sound it follows. At other times the omission or emphasis seems quite arbitrary, a decision made by an individual speaker.

My mother's name Hilda, which she thoroughly disliked, contains the same possibilities in Hull dialect. In this stanza she is present in the repeated use of the letter 'h', but she remains unnamed and therefore also hidden, absent. I am making comment here on her presence in the objects seen and handled during the activity of house clearing, but also on the way in which these same objects constantly confirmed her absolute absence.

Within this doctorate, my writing too, shifts in and out of focus as it takes up the various roles I describe in 'Opening Words' – sometimes acting as source text, sometimes as illustration, sometimes cited, sometimes active and always subject to shifting interpretations. The complications of this process have often caused me to flounder in the same way as my mother's death unbalanced me. Whilst providing my practice with valuable 'air', whilst substantially and variously contributing to its current and future development, the processes of this practice-based doctorate have also felt, at times, potentially lethal as an environment. The complications and difficulties of the process have sometimes rendered me lost and gasping, the 'landed fish' of the opening stanza of *Mother I*.

Without the support of various people, I would have found it hard to survive both my mother's death and the doctoral process. In the last stanza of the poem, I am joined by others also drowning in the alien environment of air. In this way I acknowledge the wider context of my emotion. The verse represents my awareness of a community of grief. I am also aware of a community of people also struggling with the difficulties of the doctoral process, a medium that is simultaneously highly personal and academically rigorous.

Mother II

Up there the dust hangs in veils,
I walk on joists,
eat dirt,
open box flaps.

Just two girls smiling,
as you watch Countdown
and my father calls.

Webs coat my hair and ring my nostrils.
I shut the flaps,
you steady the ladder
and the Germans retreat,
far,
into blackened corners
and Teutonic type.
Missing, presumed lost.
Lost, presumed missing.
Four consonants,
three vowels,
but no word yet.

Lost, missing presumed.
The flaps tear
and the parachutist falls
and burns,
like Icarus.

Three consonants,
four vowels: seaside.
Four consonants,
three vowels: beaches,
or beached, or washed up,
here,
down here, where the sun shines and your chair remains,

as we too,
just two girls crying
in an empty house.

In *Mother II*, I am in the attic of my mother's house. My sister and I are searching for information about my father's hidden life – his previous marriages. We never knew if my mother was aware of these relationships, she had certainly not given us any impression that she knew, and, of course, it had been impossible to ask. We had been forced to keep our discoveries about our father's past secret.

I pick up the photograph and take it to the window. In the moonlight I can see that my young father looks weary of it all, even before he has started. Is Gladys already pregnant? He looks too tired to say. Are there any more children? Did he divorce his second wife before he married my mother? Is he bigamous? Are my sister and I illegitimate? I'm tired too. These things have kept me awake too often. I tell myself it's too late, would be cruel to tell my mother now.
'How many years now since dad.....?'
'Eight. Yes, it'll be eight years this autumn since Charles died.'
And how long do I have...
to keep things under wraps
...to keep this heritage of secrets which perhaps you already know. Why else would you have taught me so well?
to let sleeping dogs lie
A code passed on from mother to daughter.
My mother's sustained unwillingness to be introspective. She brushes aside emotional discomfort.
things like that don't bear thinking about

(Sleeping Dogs, pp60-66)

This dilemma, experienced by my sister and me, could also describe my difficulty in applying critical commentary to my own writing. The difficulty of 'knowing' is central to both activities. The doubt about my mother's awareness of my father's history has parallels in the doubts inherent in any retrospective analysis of one's own work. As writers we are engaged with fiction, with imagination, with speculation, with interpretation and lies. We tap sources of knowing and unknowing.

The dilemma of telling or not telling my mother, echoes my dilemma as critical reader of my own work and the process of telling or not telling (myself) implicit in it.

As my mother's death released my sister and me from this secrecy, it simultaneously cast us into a state of continuing ignorance, hence the search of the attic. My mother seemed very present in this moment. As I stood in the attic, she sat below, watching daytime television, while my father called to me from the outreaches of the roof joists, drawing me to a cardboard box containing, not evidence of his duplicity, but of his heroism in the Second World War.

I could describe this practice-based research as a process of searching my writing 'attic' in an attempt to release myself from a state of continuing ignorance. I could also propose that the difficulty surrounding this activity results from a residual belief that continuing ignorance might be necessary for the continuation of my writing practice. However, in *Mother II*, this search

unexpectedly results in a sense of real presence: an observation that undermines any sense of resistance to the critical and analytical processes of practice-based research. Rather it suggests that such activities could stimulate a more fundamentally productive relationship with one's work. It is significant that when I undertake this activity in *Mother II*, I do not discover what I anticipate or want, but instead something different, unexpected, in excess.

In this poem, I also employ language used in a particular context during the Second World War. If the poem is concerned with the activities of searching, finding, missing and losing, the phrase 'missing presumed lost' contains these possibilities. With the introduction of the game 'Countdown', I draw attention to the linguistic construction of the phrase and give emphasis to the range of possibilities it contains. 'Missing presumed lost', were the words used in a telegram, found in the attic, and sent to my father's family when his plane was shot down in enemy territory. My use of this terminology deliberately acknowledges this cultural context. It puts our search of my mother's house into the context of those wartime losses and provides potential rationale for my father's actions.

In this way *Mother II* acknowledges that language contains these cultural and social implications, that it is, as I have already stated,¹⁵⁴ haunted by an unconsciousness, which is externally given, which is in Bakhtin's terms 'over populated with the intentions of others' (Bakhtin, 1981 p293). The poem suggests an acceptance of those theories on language that insist on its lack of

¹⁵⁴ Section, 'What is it you wish to speak of?' Appendix Two pxxxiv.

transparency and its active role in the construction of identity. These theories characterise my overall thesis and provide rationale for my cited methodology of 'writing through'.

Mother III

wrought iron, pebble path, sandy beds, garage door, ripple glass, shag pile,
calendar

floor mat, phone book, white skirting, flush doors, ceiling swirl, metal biro,
mirror

dado shelf, souvenirs, stork pot, metal jug, china sheep, tobacco jar,
photos

silk flowers, tweed chair, drop leaf, plastic seat, lace runner, gas fire,
picture

vinyl floor, key hooks, postcards, pyrex mug, painted sill, bent wire, plastic bags,
belling

stacked chairs, formica top, clipped edges, roofing felt, arum lily, ant trail,
fork

matching towels, nail scissors, bath box, toilet roll, flower tile, purple curtain,
sink

candlewick, combination, Pick Up Monkeys, blanket box, mirror slide, glass top,
foam

veneer door, fitted sheets, bedside light, alarm clock, book mark, blue bowl,
ring

wool dress, nylon slip, support stockings, interlock, pillow case, body imprint,
left

Mother III was written as an 'aide-memoire'. It operates as an example of *écriture* and has the superficial qualities of a snapshot taken to record. It lists the objects and materials of my mother's house and garden as I saw them on entering the house for the first time after her death.

9. the relations of things. It's like when you open a catchall drawer and everything there including your hand , and your gesture, means something, has some history, of its making, and of its being there. A focused catchall. Where the production of meanings is, if not continuous, so interconnected that one has the sense of, the illusion of, the "whole" of life being activated, and raised to realizations and power. Thru language.¹⁵⁵ (DuPlessis, 1990 p162)

Reading *Mother III* again, the associations are all too readily triggered, and the act of recording them was so difficult, that I am unable to complete the reading without being emotionally overtaken. The autobiographical power of these associations and their effect on this moment of analysis, lead me to question whether the demands of the doctoral process reproduce the tension between private and public as a tension between the personal and the academic¹⁵⁶. *Mother III* has academic worth in the context I am working in now; it is useful source material for the debates engaged with here. It also has private value for me as detailed documentation of my mother's home at the moment of her death. As I write this commentary, I am struggling with the possibility that the use of *Mother III* in the first context may alter, inflect or somehow detract from its private, personal value. However, I am also aware that the fictionalising processes of 'life writing' still operate in *Mother III*. Objects that were not present are re-introduced and their placement in relationship to other objects and the language of their description has its own irrealism.

¹⁵⁵ My bold.

¹⁵⁶ See also discussion of the academic and women's writing in 'Revisiting Écriture Féminine' p152.

Work on language is the key not just to creative expression, but also to philosophical/theoretical work, and to the transformation of cultural values and practices. Language produces the ideas, with all their inherent ideological assumptions of what is collectively taken to be reality. (Forsyth, intro. to Brossard, 1998 p11)

Even when fidelity to the representation of worldly reality is admitted as an overriding authorial intention, it is also possible to simultaneously acknowledge the tension between this effort to record and the way language operates. I understand and can admit that this tension produces a new real, sometimes (as I have already indicated) in excess, and always unexpected.

Mother III might also seem to raise the problematic categorisation of women's writing as predominantly concerned with the personal and domestic. I have discussed these questions earlier in this thesis.¹⁵⁷ The poem could be construed as evidence of my engagement with material that supports this description of characteristics of 'women's writing'. However, I hope *Mother III* also demonstrates the lack of usefulness inherent in such simplistic categorisation. I have already discussed how a tension between the effort to record and the operation of language can be infinitely productive. Equally, the tension between the material of the everyday and abstract thought has been identified as an equally productive strategy. It is not a methodology confined to women, but has a widely developed artistic history.

¹⁵⁷ See Naomi Schor's use of terminology, the phrase 'homey/and or ornamental details' referred to in section 'Revisiting Écriture Féminine' pp130.

Mother IV

At the co-op the uniform costs half what they charge at the school outfitters,
but still you fold sleeves and turn over waistbands.

The blazer's too stiff,
the skirt too long.

I cry, but you insist and so we go on,
through Startrite shoes and Wolsey socks,
to dancing lessons and debts,
.....to these towels:
bright orange and fit for an art student.

Too expensive!

You cry, but I insist and so we go on,
headstrong,
heart strung,
threadbare,
tied.

The uniform designed to unify can, as anyone who has had to wear one knows, be a costume displaying rather than concealing difference. A tension between respectability and rebellion, conformity and difference characterised not only my family life, but also the lives of every child who acquired the new label 'teenager' in the early nineteen sixties.

A thread of post war austerity and anxieties about respectability ran through my childhood. My parents' need to feel they were 'doing their best' for myself and my sister and 'keeping up appearances' on a very tight budget pervaded our everyday life and has remained a lasting set of (now self-imposed) constraints.

But enough of this, it is a waste of time and it is the waste I cannot bear, my post-war frugality is so firmly rooted it has become entirely instinctive (why waste the habit of a lifetime?) I eat food I do not want: clearing plates was never in question – I keep leftover scraps of food in the fridge for days: throwing away was never an option – I keep burred screws in jars under the stairs: coming in useful was always an option – I tuck small twists of string into drawers already

**cluttered with dead lighters, dented ping-pong balls, crushed biros
and grubby sweatbands. (driving home, p76)**

Mother IV documents a moment when my wish to break from these constraints overrode my concern for my mother's feelings. It explores a moment when parental power was challenged, a moment when I tried to break my childhood dependency in preparation for my new independence as a student. The early part of the poem gives an autobiographical perspective on the history behind this moment. And the single word of the last line gives some indication of the way this attempt has been marked and constantly revisited, as a moment of guilt; an incident that binds me even more tightly to my mother.

Guilt is also endemic to the autobiographical process. Writers are ruthless in their plunder of every thing and every one around them and the 'use' of autobiographical material, that tension which I have already described between the personal and the academic, the personal and the public, operates here. I understand the act of writing as always 'making public' and so my further 'use' of these poems in this academic context, can feel like homage, or an act of complete betrayal.

Mother V

**At the door stands a boy with a fish wrapped in newspaper,
he asks for my mother.
On the sofa lies a dog on a woollen rug,
he looks at my grandfather.
Down the road comes Lilian on a black bike,
she waves at the boy.**

The roe is best sliced and battered and hot.

**Rain drenched coal sheds.
A row of peas.
My father says the family next door are gypsies.**

Mother V refers to an incident in my childhood. Until gambling and ill health took their toll, my mother's father had worked as a fish merchant, buying direct from the trawlers at Hull Docks. When we (the extended family) visited, he called on old contacts, who arranged for a whole cod to be delivered to the door. I remember the boy unwrapping it for inspection, standing quite dwarfed by the huge fish in his arms. After it had been received into the house, our whole environment seemed dominated by the fish's fate, by its gutting, filleting, slicing and battering at the professional hands of my grandmother and mother.

In *Mother V*, the last line, 'My father says the family next door are gypsies', undercuts this scene of domestic harmony.

I cannot remember a time when I was not aware of the social distance between my mother's family and my father's. The difference between the occupants of the Hull council house and the former owners of Frating Hall, Essex was evident and problematic. As we passed between the two families, my sister and I adjusted our behaviour, even our accents, to suit differing expectations. Almost from birth we were apprentices of the intricate nuances of the English class system and the North, South divide.

Perhaps my ability to move between these modes underpins my interest in the existence or non-existence of a personal or gendered voice. My discomfort with the former may be based on my own ability to shift my voice. The strength of my Midland's accent fluctuates according to the company I

keep and I observe, with each linguistic change, the subtle behavioural adjustments and changing attitudes that accompany each mode of pronunciation and habit of phrasing.

Similarly the difficulties of the category 'woman' are explored at length in any recent evaluation of feminism and most notably in Denise Riley's seminal text, *Am I That Name?* (Riley, 1998). Even if one, in some deep recess of the self, adheres to the category of 'woman', its interpretation outside this personal confine is instantly problematic and renders that personal adherence equally difficult.

These are issues constantly revisited in this thesis and I remain resolutely irresolute about them. My background has, in various ways, confirmed an inability to trust what would appear to be evident truths. My father taught me to be scrupulously honest as he 'lived a lie'. My mother's sharp intelligence and potential was overlooked, overshadowed by my father's patriarchal views and his class-based charm. I have never felt comfortably placed in any category which did not allow for a level of porosity.

Mother VI

1955

a towelling beach robe with french seams and belt loops
our costumes chafe
but still we swim and run up the wooden steps

1956

a gathered sundress with rickrack and matching bolero
Mabel and Ethel, Betty and Ted
my uncle marries his childhood sweetheart

1957

seersucker shorts with thick elastic and side buttons
tide against breakwater
the beach hut curtains are rusted to their wires

1958

a cotton top with picot edges and cap sleeves
calor gas and perished rubber
seagulls peck at the roofing felt
empty cockle shells open like wings
and a blue and red ball floats slowly out to sea

Mother VI documents the 'outfits' my mother made each year: new summer clothes to help us compete with our wealthier cousins when we visited my father's family for our summer holiday. The poem is an appreciation of the loyalty and devotion of a mother who was motherless at five. *Mother VI* goes to the heart of my sense of loss when my mother died and whilst I continue (irresolutely) to acknowledge the problematic nature of the category 'woman', this poem gives evidence of the importance of my mother to my identity. *Écriture féminine* places great emphasis on women's relationship with their mothers. In psychoanalytic terms it is crucial to the complex relationship that exists between language and identity. The autobiographical emphasis of this thesis owes much to these theories and I present the loss expressed in this poem, its inconsolable quality, as support for the continuing importance of gender to my writing practice.

Mother VII

soft stroked
tender palmed
I dreamed

I was hand held
assured
and re-assured

now certain
I know certain
certain is
your death

And here at the last poem, in the last attempt to demonstrate my thesis, to conclude my conclusions, I arrive at a personal end point, a final inability. There is nothing I feel able, or wish to say about this poem. It is an end point, but not finite. It is in its infinite quality also a beginning. There is a sense of circularity, repetition and continuation inherent in grief. My chosen methodology of 'writing through' also contains strategies of erasing and re-writing, re-reading and revisiting, inscription and erosion. Grief is endlessly reflexive. It is a sense of loss that creates the strongest understanding of presence, of the present, of the continuing now.

Appendices

These appendices contain a catalogue of selected works. They are listed in the order in which they make their first substantive appearance in the body of the thesis.

The dates refer to the date of first publication or, in the case of the digital films, the date of first showing.

Those works that have not been published or performed are given the date of their completion or short listing.

Appendix One

Short Prose

Contents

Boudicca Queen of the Barbarians (2003)	3700 words
America! America! (2002)	1766 words
Distance (2004)	1617 words

Boudicca Queen Of The Barbarians

So I am to be Boudicca, Boudicca queen of the Barbarians.

My husband told me it was an honour, but his mistress looked away and led my daughter from the room. Still, Boudicca it is.

They have given me a helmet and a sword, but it's the whip I favour most, the whip I practice here in the dark. It is very dark down here and cool. When we crossed the arena the sand burned the soles of my feet and when I looked up at the sailors rigging the awnings, the sun was blinding. Yes, it is as hot as Vulcan's workshop in the arena, so at first I welcomed this chill. But now I can't stop shivering, from fear as much as cold I suspect. I wish I could write. If I tried to put down this alternate burning and cooling of my body in clear words, I might begin to understand why my emotions too veer between fever and ice. But there isn't a lamp to see by, let alone write. Dear husband you could have just deprived me of light. That would have silenced me. And a silent wife was all you required; a mute companion who did not write to the Senate, or read her poems in the forum. Not much to ask, you said, but I couldn't do it, so now I must do this. I must be Boudicca.

I crack my whip again and notice...something, flickering in the shadows. Perhaps I can use it as a target to perfect my aim. I flick my whip and try to hit it, once, twice and then.... was that a scream? A beaked head stuck with blue feathers comes at me out of the darkness. I crack my whip a third time and

snatch up my sword. The masked figure, for now I see the fiend is only a mask, drops to the ground. I move closer and it speaks, 'For Caesar's sake have pity!'

'What are you?' I ask. Insulted the creature lifts its head.

'Can't you tell? I'm a peacock.'

'Of course, of course, a beautiful peacock.' I flatter, for this is no time to make enemies, even of birds.

'Beautiful, but evil.' Counters my new companion. 'The peacock is a spiteful creature, capable of pecking its rival to death.'

'To death? Surely not!' For this is no time to talk of death, even with birds.

'It's true, they fight to the death.' And again I'm shivering. The peacock comes further out of the shadows, its body is clearly female, but the mask covers the whole head and the voice is muffled.

'Your mask fits well.' I say.

'Too well, we women mask our feelings too well.' The intonation is familiar - I try again. 'The peacock is an elegant bird.'

'With a small head. This mask is hollow. A small hollow head which fits me too snugly.'

'If it pinches why not take it off?'

The peacock squawks derisively and hisses, 'Follow me.'

It seems I have been invited, or should I say summoned, anyway it is supposed to be a great honour and is traditional for us contestants to eat

together, to feast before we fight. Personally I would rather stay here. Skulk beneath the arena and hope my daughter can find me, can come and say goodbye for the last time. But this peacock insists, menacing me with its sharp beak, pecking at my passivity. It ushers me through the mob already assembling to jeer at my slaughter, scratches my arm until I climb the steps of the baths and chases me through stone bays cloaked in steam and scented oils on into a marble lined room where a table is loaded with dishes, plates and flasks of every shape and size. Fruit is heaped up in glistening piles. Flagons line the walls. There are pools of honey, lakes of sauces and endless baskets piled with bread.

Every one is eating and talking. I don't know any of them, except...yes, I recognise this hand. It is that of my host, a Senator and my husband's closest colleague. His plump paw rests in mine and sweats with betrayal. Of course! I should have known there would be someone here to keep my fate sealed tight like the lids on these bowls. The Senator gives my hand a damp shake, picks up a dish and cradles it lovingly. 'Well now, what do we have here?' he croons, 'pigeon perhaps?' He sniffs the steam rising from a hole in the lid. 'Or is it lark?' He lifts the lid to reveal a pile of tiny breasts. 'Larks, larks!' he yelps and whistles a cracked version of their song. 'But larks in what? In plums?' He sniffs again, 'Yes damsons, definitely damsons. Larks cooked in damson sauce with...? Is there a hint?' My host dips a fat finger in the pot and licks it. 'Is there a hint of wine?' A drenched finger is offered to me, I shake my head. He tastes

again, 'Sicilian wine, a trifle harsh, but I'm not complaining.' I try to move away, but his sticky finger restrains me, before flickering across to another steaming dish. Mussels this time stacked in circles, an arena of open mouths. I shudder. The senator picks out a shell. 'There's green stuff on em!' he shouts, 'Look here!'

'Parsley!' the peacock squawks and the Senator giggles and flicks her beak with a wilted stem. Yes, it's a pretty game he plays and now tries to draw in two sailors, who stand apart and talk anxiously about the awnings. They have been rigging them all morning, swinging and scrambling amongst the ropes like a troupe of monkeys. But the wind is getting up and these sails, hauled out to shade the crowd, struggle to take it. Flat-rigged, they can only flap and roll. More wind, the sailors mutter and the noise in the arena will be deafening. I wonder if I care that no one will hear my dying screams?

One of the sailors is young, pale skinned, nervous as I. He repeatedly tosses strands of soft, yellow hair out of his eyes and keeps looking at his companion for reassurance. His friend is much older, muscular, but worn, weathered and battered by a life at sea. The Senator is trying to seduce the young sailor into his guessing game. He holds a small turquoise pot under his nose. 'Here is a secret,' he tempts, 'a hidden treasure. Just a hole here for a whiff to escape, just the tip of a tongue between the teeth.' The Senator inches open the lid and the young sailor lowers his nose, but the old man steps between them, seizes the dish and begins to address it. His voice is a surprise. It is quiet, melodious, full of humour. 'Come on now,' he cajoles, 'no false modesty

please, I'm an old man, I can't dally for my pleasure, give up your juices.' And with that he removes the lid, snatches up a spoon and eats. 'Peaches, peaches in honey, peaches soused in honey with sprigs of lavender. Mm, the most fragrant and sweet companion I have ever had the pleasure to eat.' The blond sailor laughs and encouraged the old man goes on. 'A veritable goddess amongst food; to someone like me that is; someone who has languished at sea for months at a stretch. I tell you dried fish was a treat for us. Or a little bit of biscuit with mould on it - for flavour you understand - the mould. Yes, I've survived on that. Still you knew where you were with such food. Your belly knew what to expect and could decently prepare itself. A sailor wasn't seduced by that food; wasn't always in a state of frustrated anticipation; wasn't left afterwards, stuffed, sleepy and fit only for the couch. Yes, dried fish kept you on your toes alright, kept you finely tuned and ready to fight.'

At that we all cheer, we who are ready to fight. Am I? Resigned maybe, but ready? The old sailor inclines his head and offers me the fragrant blue bowl. The Senator claps him on the back and it seems to me that his damp, white fingers lie on the old man's brown hide like the hand of a recently slain corpse.

The Senator is toasting every one in turn. He empties bowl after bowl of wine. 'For medicinal purposes,' he burps. 'I have an affliction, strong wine can relieve the pressure, can provide a through passage.' And he toasts the wine flagon crying, 'To irrigation, to irrigation!'

I am wondering if a couple more bowls may blur his vision enough for me to slip away. But casting about the room for an unguarded exit, I see my peacock is still here, circling the latest arrival: a hulking, lumbering, muscle-bound monster, heavy of thigh, neck and eye; a braggart exposing his torso without invitation, pointing with pride to the scars that scour and pucker his skin. He announces their origin, 'An Indian lion, a female tiger, a sharpened bull's horn.' Here is an example of the worst arena veteran, a Bestiarius, the most brutal and brutish of all the gladiators.

'Cover yourself,' orders the old sailor, offering him a dish of wine, 'cover yourself and drink.' The brute's hands paw the delicate silver bowl, they fumble it to the ground, but he only grunts and drinks straight from the flagon, letting the dark wine pour like runnels of blood down his chin.

The Senator is also pressing wine on the blond sailor, who is demanding egg and raw mutton: gladiator food. It seems the young fool needs money and means to fight for it in the arena. The Bestiarius is full of encouragement. He talks of honour and flexes his great torso, making it ripple obscenely under the young sailor's admiring hand. Flushed with wine and jealousy, the Senator moodily sucks a pale tendril of squid. He waves it in the air and calls to the Bestiarius to sit down, to stop making a spectacle of himself, but the great brute has found an admirer. He takes a tiny, plump pullet, all trussed up and sprinkled with herbs, rips it apart and stuffs it into his mouth, bones and all. Then he lifts the hog's head from its pride of place at the centre of the table. He

holds it at arm's length and we see the two beasts face to face. The Bestiarius lunges forward and sinks his teeth into a huge onion wedged between the boar's jaws. They remain, locked snout to snout, until the Bestiarri grunts, wrenches the onion free and grinds it to a pulp between his own blackened teeth. He laughs, spraying gobbits of onion laced with pullet fat into the young sailor's face. The Senator crows and pelts the Bestiarius with pieces of squid, which bounce off him and litter the floor. Every one is cheering and stamping, only the old sailor and I sit quietly side by side. He snaps green beans between his teeth and chews the sections thoughtfully. 'Why fight?' he asks, 'why not pay a substitute?'

'Who? Who would substitute for me?'

'Vestal virgins of course, look how some of them starve themselves, they want to die.' I bite into an apple, leaving an imprint of my teeth in the waxy red skin.

'How could I, they're so young and besides I must fight, for my daughter's sake.' The old man raises his eyebrows sceptically and I take another vicious bite of my apple. 'I must show her a woman can be brave; can fight for what she believes, like Boudicca. How she battled! Yes, I shall try to be like Boudicca, for my daughter's sake.'

The old man nods, snaps a final bean and tries to distract me with his dream: every night he dreams of a boat, every night the same boat. The old man knows the craft well by now. In his dreams he has sailed it in all weathers,

on all seas. He has rigged every combination of sails and has carried every conceivable cargo. He says that the boat has become part of him, that in a sense they are one and the same. To help explain he quotes from a poem by Catullus,

'Before you were a yacht, you stood, part of some wooded slope, where the leaves speak continuously in sibilants together....'

'I dream I am that tree and that boat.' He says and his voice is gentle and full of longing. It lulls me like the motion of a calm sea; it makes me feel safe. At the end of his tale the old man offers me a small cake. It rests in his grainy palm like an egg in a wooden bowl. When I bite into it I taste honey and something else - I notice a thin black pod on the table - vanilla, yes I can taste vanilla too. Struck by an idea, I pick up the pod and hold it out to the old sailor. 'Is your boat as slender as this?'

'Aye, black and narrow as that pod.' I pick up a corner of the linen tablecloth.

'And the sails? I ask.

'White as that cloth, best Egyptian canvas.'

'And are the ropes on your boat made of African hemp?'

'Aye, best hemp' He murmurs.

'And the hooks of ivory?'

'Carved ivory.' He sighs tenderly.

'I have your boat.'

'It's cruel to mock an old man's dream!' he cries and sweeps a great pile of honey cakes from the table. 'But I have, I have!' I shout, 'I have the boat of

your dreams!' and the peacock flutters around me hissing and shushing. 'Will you sail her for me?' I whisper. 'Now you're dreaming,' he says, snatching up a cake from the floor.

'She's moored close by.'

'At Ostia?'

'At Ostia.'

Our heads are close together now and when he sighs again I can smell honey on his breath. 'Please, it will give me something to fight for...please, for my daughter's sake.'

'As a child I loved the sea,' he muses, back in his dream.

'For her sake then?'

'Aye, aye.' Said so softly the peacock flutters close to hear.

Suddenly the Senator lets rip with a hearty belch. It's a desperate attempt to retrieve the attention of the young sailor who is still dancing around the Bestiarius. The lumbering hulk is demonstrating sword moves but the Senator risks all and dodges the blade to come close. 'What animal will it be?' he pipes. But the Bestiarius only grunts. 'What animal will you fight?' the Senator presses.

'I have a special duty tomorrow.'

'Oh, elephants is it? Do you have the honour of the elephants?'

'No.'

'What then, what is your 'special duty'?' chirrup the Senator.

The Bestiarius plants his heavy feet apart and brings his sword around in a great arc until it points directly at me. 'I shall drive Boudicca's empty chariot from the arena.' I gasp and the peacock squawks. So, now I know. This Bestiarius will be my executioner. I shall be slain like an animal. Grape skins dry in my mouth. As I race back through the scented steam, I spit out the pips. Two soldiers join me on the steps of the baths and shadow me back through the mob, through the stifling heat of the arena. The sand kicks up from my heels and the awnings thunder and crack as I run down, down into the darkness where I crouch and cry out with the animals all through the dreadful night.

At last there are footsteps and then cries of 'Bring water!' and 'More hay, more hay!' Dawn arrives and with it the young sailor carrying water and a message from the peacock. 'Leave by the Porta Sanivivaria, whip the horses up and do not pause, straight through the gate and on to Ostia.' But the night has weakened me. 'And what about the Bestiarius?' I say, 'my assassin.' The sailor tosses his hair. 'I shall fight him.' He says, 'I shall kill him for you.' I am tempted to laugh, but this youth, so young he could be my son, has taken my hand and now he is telling me his story, 'It was a day like any other,' he whispers, 'I was with my companions all morning, fishing from small boats. As the strange ship arrived they fled, but in that idle centre of the day, out of that quiet, safe moment came such a longing to know, to see.' He drops my hand and slaps his forehead, 'Fool! What did I see? Nothing. Instead my curious gaze was punched into a terrified stare. My dream of sweet days was ripped

into a bitter nightmare. They took me, threw me into the hold to rot and I saw nothing until he rescued me, just as he will rescue you.' He takes both my hands in his and squeezes them. 'The old sailor saved me and this very moment he is rigging your boat. He will sail you and your daughter to safety and then he will take me home.'

How I want to believe this earnest youth and his dogged protector, but the Bestiarius is always there, a dark figure standing between the light and me.

Listen, the trumpets are already sounding. They are coming to herd us out of our darkness. Rank upon rank of sweating victims. I strap on my sword, it bumps heavily on my thigh. I push the whip through my belt and put on my helmet. Now I am Boudicca, now I am fearless and ready to fight. A convict cries and begs to be spared. I despise him. I aim a kick at his cowering haunches. I draw my sword and the wretch slinks away to line up with the Roman army - good. When the enactment of the battle begins, I will be sure to kill him first. Someone is pushing me up into the chariot. I turn and cut them on the arm. They scream curses at me, but we are moving now, out into the arena. The first gladiators begin the cry, 'Ave imperator! Hail Caesar! Hail Caesar! Morituri te salutant!' We who are about to die salute you! And then sun on white marble, sudden blinding, and aagh! Fresh animal shit and blood, foul, hot stinking. The Venatore in front of me misses a step and vomits. The acrid stench catches in the horses' nostrils and they rear up. I enter the arena with my horses and my whip up. The crowd roars, but there is another smell

now: the rank odour of fear: dense, thick. I slash it with my sword and the crowd roars again. We march on. Beautiful young gladiators are showered with flowers and charms and flasks of wine are pressed to their mouths. The Bestiarii march unheeded draped in the skins of the animals they have slaughtered. Some have second heads of tigers or lions strung around their necks. As they march their trophies nod and from a distance the Bestiarii look less like men and more like some kind of monstrously deformed two-headed beast.

Suddenly there is a flash of blue amongst them. The peacock flutters around my assassin; she holds a flask of wine up to his mouth. I see his head and the head of his female tiger loll back. He drinks and gouts of blood red wine spill all down his neck. Now the peacock is gone and the brute grins round at his fellows and roars, 'Ave imperator!' The crowd joins in the chant, 'Ave imperator, ave imperator!' The Emperor stands, his purple flags whip in the wind, the awnings thunder. It is deafening. The dust is thick in the air and the sun is blinding. I cannot hear and I cannot see. My horses slow and out of the corner of my eye I glimpse the sun reflecting off a lock of yellow hair. Suddenly there is light between me and the dark shadow of the Bestiarius. I whip my horses on and I see the Bestiarius falter. The young sailor is still several paces away from him, yet the great hulk stumbles and staggers. The sword drops from his hand, he clutches his stomach and as he falls I see a thread of blood run, like more red wine, from the corner of his mouth. My

young hero stands over him bewildered. He looks from his unbloodied sword to the prone beast and back again. He was sure he didn't thrust and yet....

Suddenly I can hear something. I can hear myself screaming. My arm comes down again and again, cracking the whip and I scream on, hauling the reins, guiding the horses, turning the chariot, aiming it straight at my assassin. There is a jolt as the wheels bump up and over his body, a lurch as the young sailor throws himself into the chariot and howls from the crowd as we race out through the Porta Sanivivaria.

On, on, I should go straight on. But I rein the horses back and once again catch a glimpse of iridescent blue. Look, oh look there, a child is waving from the shoulders of a peacock. Hands lift her high. I reach, she reaches and my daughter tumbles laughing into my arms. Over my shoulder I see the peacock pull off her mask and whirl it above her head. It spins so fast the feathers blur into a streak of blue fire. Sweat is running into my eyes, it's difficult to see, to recognize...and then the mask flies into the air and there is the woman with her arm aloft. My eyes clear and I see it is, of course, my husband's mistress cheering and waving, shouting and laughing. 'On!' she cries, 'On, on!'

America! America!

America! America! Is anybody there?

Yes, I'm here. I know I am because I can feel one middle finger, a lock of hair on my forehead, a small bone in my wrist and one leg is still present - numb, but here with me, my own dear calf and thigh.

My darling lips too kiss the dirt, giving a pope's blessing to my homeland. To America where I lie, scanning the dark with my one free eye, searching for my other hand. There it is, all upturned and coated in a dirty, white crust that grows thicker each second. My poor hand is becoming just another part of the dust landscape of blocks and metal bars, which surrounds me. We look the same now, broken body and broken building. And we hear the same mobile phone calling in the stillness, calling

America! America! Is anybody there?

Yes, I'm here. I know I am because I can still remember.

I remember the blue and gold morning. Liquid sunshine on glass. The brightness of a thousand reflected suns. Endless slats of gold intersecting one another. Great pyramids and ladders of geometric light reaching upwards. The pure gold looking-glasses of America.

And beyond? Only the sky humming with blue. Blue on blue, bluest blue, dense, layered through the lenses of so many squinting eyes. The endless, vast acreage of American dreams - Wild West and open prairie, wetlands and deserts, deep rivers and wide oceans. Lifting from every horizon

in mile upon mile of rinsed, clear cobalt. Or spied through glass, or opening like a turquoise butterfly to greet you at the subway exit. The last blue before the axe, the guillotine, the trapdoor. The very blue I saw through my window this morning, hanging like a floating rectangle beyond the golden towers.

Because I can remember this I'm still here and I can count the fingers on my hand. Four fingers and a thumb that I last saw pressed up on the warm glass to steady me while I leaned and looked at something which should not have been there. Watched it glinting gold as it caught the sunlight, watched it move steadily across the last blue. My phone rang, but I didn't answer it, a colleague spoke but I didn't turn, I was watching its purpose. I remember it entered my gilded morning with such purpose.

A phone rings now, but a different cry this time and further away. It's so quiet down here and the dust rains down on me so softly, like a tender blanket. A bead of sweat forms at my hairline and starts to roll, carving its way through my snow-capped forehead. It rolls like a skier zig zagging this way and that. A lunatic pathway getting faster until it drops: red. Not sweat then, but blood, which implodes on the American soil beneath my cheek. Such a rich red which turns the dust a grey black and there I am again, with my splayed hand against the warm glass, seeing that red that should not have been there. The purposeful intruder has disappeared and instead such red. A great mushroom of it, bubbling out into the blue. Boiling out like a fast blooming flower. An organic, red carnation beautiful in its geometric vase.

Yes, I'm losing blood, but it doesn't matter, I'm sure I have it to spare.

My body feels so solid now. It fills all this space with hard muscle and bone. It's seething with life, pulsing and flickering with tiny movements, vibrant and bloody as the carnation. Every sound down here is like an oratorio, every peppering of dust the most sensuous caress. This earth tastes sweet on my lips and in the darkness I can see every colour there has ever been. I am home and warm here. The lovely curve of my spine rests on these jags of concrete and steel as if stretched out on the softest bed. I fell gently and I'm glad. I would not like to have fallen like them. The seeds of the flower, they were dropped downwards one by one, then two or three together. Wheeling black pods, free falling onto stony soil, silent and lonely. I saw them and pitied them. I wanted to put out my hand to catch them, they looked so small and lost. I'm not lost, I'm found, held, cradled in my dusty bed. I belong to this moment, to these memories, which keep me here listening to the phones. There is a chorus of them now, calling together

Is anybody there?

Of course I am. I'm remembering the red carnation and then the hush. I'm recalling how I took my hand from the window, how it left a sweaty mark. Yes adrenaline came quickly, but we were orderly in our flight. Some put papers straight, some returned lids to pens, some pushed chairs under desks. I straightened a pad and turned off my screen. We put out our arms to usher others in front; we held open doors for our neighbours. No one shouted, no one

wept. It was not the place for that, our light, airy office. It was a place to hurry to, not from. But we had seen the cruel flower bloom, we knew the colours had changed for ever and there was no reason to stay by the window, nothing to see but black smoke and falling fruit.

We just wanted to see the blue again, but we didn't jostle or push. When the lifts were full, we walked quietly to the stairs and descended in rhythm, down, down, down...

Hear that? Something is moving above, a grinding, groaning adjustment and I imagine tectonic plates shifting slowly and inexorably; changing the make up of the world all those millions of years ago. It's changing again now, but more quickly and the fine dust of it is still settling on the precious bones, which make a bridge of my graceful neck. It feels like a lover softly blowing kisses and would lull me to sleep but the memories keep me awake. They want me to remember that we kept going two by two until the steps themselves rocked and we tottered and then ducked instinctively, just as I would duck now hearing the noises above. But I can't move, nor do I need to. I know I'm safe here, that I can't fall as more did when a second intruder sliced the blue and entered our golden tower. This sound was like the end of the world, not an adjustment. We staggered against each other clutching walls and rails, our eyes widening. Then someone started to move and we all followed. To a quicker rhythm now, down, down, down and round the corner, down, down, down and round to meet them coming up sweating with the weight of steel helmets and fire axes,

stamping their booted feet. They had purpose too and we were reassured, we smiled and cheered them on. Heroes, American heroes every one. We clapped them on the back and made way to let them pass. They were used to the hot red and smoky black, 'Go on up', we said, thinking 'This is your place now, not ours.' Yes, I remember, how they smiled back for our sakes, in spite of knowing, yet still hopeful and determined to go on, to get there, to meet the fierce, searing heat of the reddest hell on earth, on American earth. True American heroes and each of their faces is a permanent snapshot in my mind. A set of photographs, which include the look on the face of a young colleague as he glanced back past me at their disappearing feet. He hesitated for just a second, breaking the rhythm of his step, tripping so I had to steady him and guide him on down in search of the blue.

The dust is getting much thicker, I think the seismic shifts above are causing it. It's muffling the sound but I can still hear the phones. One just stopped, but then another immediately started up. They are taking turns, desperate to get through. They'll try anything. Hear that one? That's new. A little Copland isn't it? Or am I imagining things? There it goes again. From Appalachian Spring I think. Clear chiming notes, like the clear blue and gold we were running to, down the stairs, across the foyer and out through the doors. Clear notes singing out

Are you there America? Is anybody, anybody there?

Yes, I'm here, still here and to prove it I put out my tongue and taste my sweet, sweet blood. I raise my darling head a little too, I want to smell my sweat, but I can't. The air is dense with dust. It hangs in soft veils, clogging my nose and lining my eyelashes. My eyelids are so heavy I would like to close them, to float like this dust, which has surrounded me ever since I left the building. As we stepped out onto the sidewalk, we instinctively looked up, but the blue and gold were gone and our music was only the wailing of fire engines and police cars.

How we ran then our knees bent, our feet slapping. Someone clutched at me and we stumbled shoulder to shoulder until we heard that terrible noise. It drove my companion on, but I stopped and turned and looked back. I had to, I wanted to see. But it was too late and as I stood it came rushing towards me and before I could move a step I was overtaken.....

By the ash of Pompeii, by the lava of Mount Etna, by the mud slide, the bomb blast, the rising waters, the teargas, the tsunami, the earthquake, the sandstorm. By sleep Sleep, I must sleep. It's warm as blood down here and the dust is too soft; my cheek can no longer resist it's pillowy charm. I look at my porcelain white hand. One finger is lifted and seems so lonely I wish I could take it in my mouth and lick it clean and kiss it. My thigh too I would love to stroke back into feeling. But I'm so warm and sleepy my longings are distant, like that slow thudding which could be my own heartbeat, or...perhaps... someone somebody pounding above?

.. It is a heavy, stunned note and like the bass on a passing car stereo it's getting fainter and fainter. Now all I can hear is the phone. Just one, still crying out into the dark. Calling

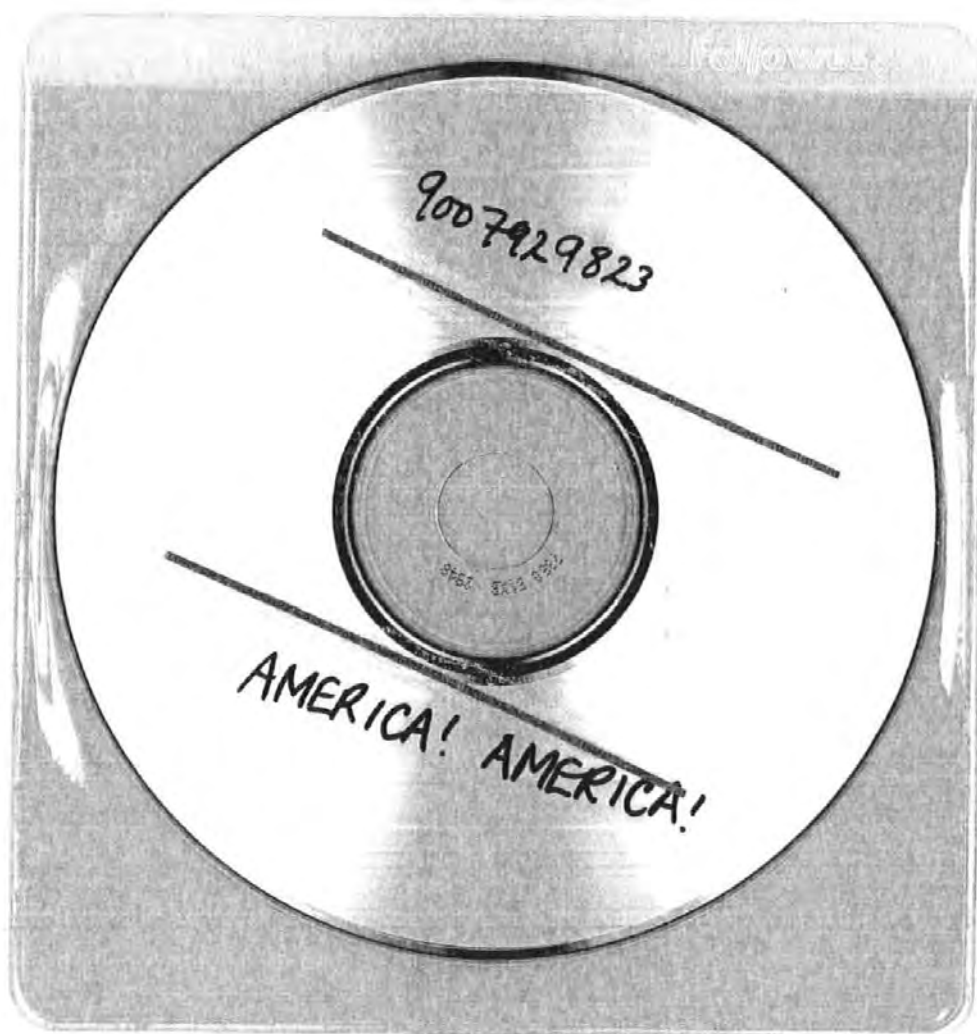
America!

Oh America!

America! America!

AMERICA! AMERICA! - sound version, length: 12 minutes.

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Distance

She was losing her distance; things were getting too close. She tried to tell him, but it made no sense when she said, *I just can't seem to get far enough away.*

For what? He asked.

To see. She replied.

See what?

Myself.

It made no sense, but he put his arm round her shoulders and gave her a present.

For your birthday.

How nice.

It was. Small, discreet, a smooth oval of thick, black plastic. Thick and warm, it sat in her hand like a stone you might keep from the beach. And when she slipped a nail into the only tiny crevice, it flipped open like one of those bivalve shells. It fell into two identical thin wings.

You can put it in your bag.

So she closed it up and slipped it into her pocket. Left it there for a second, no more, before her hand dipped back, eager to touch. It was so warm to the touch.

You can look at yourself whenever you want to.

Did she want to? She wasn't sure, but he was waiting, so she palmed her present, brought it back out into the light, opened the silver wings and angled them to reflect the view from the window - the clouds, the dipping trees. She leaned forwards for a better look and that's when it happened - again - too close - how she blocked out the sky! She was like a female Gulliver with her black nostrils and her double chin. Shut it. Shut it quick! She did and he looked surprised, but then.... well, there was so much else to think about, to do. He had arranged it so well, her birthday. First the present and then....

How do you want it?

The peroxided boy picked up a hank of hair and dropped it carelessly so that it fell across her eye. She didn't reply so he sighed, slid a finger under another lock and began to raise it up

How much off?

The hair reached maximum height and flicked away, poking her in the other eye. But she didn't flinch. She was too busy holding off her reflection. She was trying desperately to keep it at a distance and didn't notice his stylish, languorous contempt. The boy took hold of himself with an exaggerated shake and started to brush her hair vigorously, charging it with electricity so that it stood on end and crackled. She was appalled, broke out in a sweat. Electricity could be the final straw. Electricity might make a force field of the precious space between her and....he stopped brushing suddenly and pushed her hair up from underneath.

*I think we need to make some fullness round the chin, more flattering,
more feminine.*

He tried to catch her eye in the mirror, smiled.

You've got good eyes; shall we highlight them with a fringe?

But she was transfixed with horror. Her chin, her eyes were getting dangerously close, while he? He was very faint; she could hardly hear or see. He was miles back across the room, zooming into the distance, joining the other clients who were gazing into mirrors on the opposite side of the room. She could see the backs of their heads and,

Oh thank goodness!

caught sight of her own head, reflected next to one of their faces, caught it in one of their mirrors. Maybe, maybe if she could just keep an eye on it because, small as it looked, it might produce a counter pull, might save her from crashing up against the cold surface here in front of her. Something had to be done, she was getting so close she could see her breath on the glass, could see the water vapour condensing, could identify every separate drop

There, how about that?

The boy put his hands on her shoulders and lowered his face next to hers. In the mirror she saw a two-headed monster, blond and brown, smiling and frowning and only micro seconds away from contact. Micro, micro...he stepped back and held up a hand mirror so she could see the back of her head in close up. Massive counterpull! Her breath whistled out with relief, which he took

for approval and so let her get up, get away. She was no longer up against herself, but escaped out into the street where he was waiting. He held her at arms length and saw her differently. He smiled at her elfin fringe and her flattered chin and rewarded her with a kiss.

Let's go shopping. Get you a new outfit. Something....

What?

Like this?

It doesn't look like me.

But it is. It's very you, said the assistant.

Is it? Me?

She can't quite...

The cubicles are very small aren't they? Hardly room to...

Stepping back she collided with the curtain, with the shop assistant who could see...

Your colour.

Is it?

So close the blue filled her vision, like the sky in the silver wings. All blue, not like her eyes. Still, the shop assistant was insistent.

Your colour, that blue, very smart.

He saw her differently.

It's not quite...no.

No.

She thought not

Too...?

Smart for you.

He could see that.

Not light hearted enough.

Am I?

The mirror in the cubicle showed her stumbling backwards in blue. Light-hearted? She could laugh at herself and then her reflection would laugh back and the dress would be.... like he said, too smart for this laughing woman, too harshly cut for the curve of her lip, cheek and thigh.

Perhaps the silk?

More you, he said.

Softer, she thought.

Dearer, said the assistant.

You're worth it.

Worth her weight in....silk? Which was so thin that it weighed nothing and could afford no protection, could not stop the cool of the mirror chilling her skin. She slipped backwards through the curtain. Took her new silky, light-hearted self away, off to....

Lunch?

Italian?

Maybe.

Or Thai?

That sounds nice. Thai. Delicate flavours and colours, pale greens and yellows, ginger and lemongrass to go with her light dress.

Thai, yes, Thai.

You know you could be oriental?

Could I?

Such a thought had never ever....

Oriental?

It was not part of her....how could he think...? Oriental? Where did he get that idea?

Almond eyes.

Have I?

She was tempted by the mirror in her pocket. Just a glimpse to check.

You can look at yourself whenever you want to.

Flip it open and check on the almond...and the silk.

My eyes?

Yes, almond.

In shape?

Just a quick look.

And colour.

Almond - light brown, tan almost, almond.

My eyes, really?

They look it to me.

But to her? She daren't risk the bivalve wings, even though.... how extraordinary, quite unexpected, oriental. A whole lifetime of mirrors and she had never...even as close as she was now...had never... well I never...Thai.

It's getting cold.

Sorry?

Your soup, eat it before it gets cold.

She picked up the spoon, which had her at a distance and upside down. She noted how the bowl rounded her eyes so they looked...

Not oriental surely?

Are you still thinking about that? It was just a passing....

Only in passing?

If I had known you would take it this seriously.

But seriously now, only oriental in passing? The Thai waitress slipped behind her back and she saw the small, hurrying figure reflected in the restaurant window. In passing just like that?

Something about the eyes, that's all I meant.

He sighed and she got on with her soup, kept her eyes lowered and by the time they left it was dark. Only he was visible in the lights of the dashboard, which showed petrol, and speed and the curve of his chin, a tender line, lifting occasionally to check the mirror, tightening as he smiled. She felt herself relax as she watched him. A lovely day, apart from...and that was just

her, just her. He sensed her gaze, glanced across and smiled again. They were heading out of town. He looked back at the open road, such a nice face, clear, clear of any....The sea now on their right, black except where the moon made a pathway. For walking on water? It felt like that on the pier, with the dark sea shifting below the boards. They measured their footsteps, avoided the cracks despite the fact that they knew...and she remembered, as a child, the obsession of it, the fear, just one false move, hopping and skipping towards the security of the rails. Cold metal biting into your chest as you leaned, quite safe to lean over and gaze down, but what was that? Just a quiet plop as the warm stone slipped from her pocket and returned...she turned, but he hadn't noticed. Now she could *not* look at herself whenever she wanted to. What a relief. No more Gulliver. She smiled and leaned over the rail, looking down at.... And that's when it happened again. Too close, *he* was too close, standing with his arm around her. The sea showed their swaying reflections quite merged, her body into his, her head bulging out, bleeding into his globular neck. One three-legged, two armed figure leaning its double head downwards to kiss the waves. Too far, too close, too near to falling, disappearing beneath the inky surface like the pebble from her pocket.

The figure stretched apart like bubblegum. She lifted her face from the surface of the sea where it was already slapped wet by the waves. She turned and began to run, feet pounding the boards, careless of the cracks. She ran with the silk slicked to her legs, with her head back and her eyes on the distance.

Appendix Two

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What is it you wish to Speak of?

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Dangers

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DVD – 80 minutes approx. black and white

What is it you wish to speak of? (2005)

DVD – 20 minutes approx. black and white

Talk Dancing (2007)

Edited collection of written responses in booklet form

What is it You Wish to Speak Of? (2005)

What is it you wish to speak of?

This commentary documents the development of an artistic project and some of its outcomes. It is also an account of the areas of concern revealed by this process. As a project 'What is it you wish to speak of?' produced a range of outcomes; these will be listed in the 'Last Word' part of this section.

The Question

My first writing task was to arrive at a question capable of stimulating useful debate. But as a precursor to this act of writing, I had to consider my role as questioner; a role often associated with relative power, a role that might suggest levels of priority or hierarchy. Some feminist sociologists, including Ann Oakley, have argued that 'objectivity' is a sexist position and that the 'accepted orthodoxy on methods of interviewing is inappropriate for female social scientists interviewing other women' (Wolff, 1990 p75). Though not claiming that my question was part of a sociological study, I was aware that the established model of a detached, impartial, potentially controlling interviewer, who keeps her views and values out of the dialogue, was neither feasible nor desirable, not least because it was unlikely to release useful material. Wolff explains that these arguments about method are important, because they link the congruence of officially prescribed techniques with male experience in our culture, and demonstrate the associated incompatibility of such methods with women's lives and ways of communicating. She quotes Dorothy Smith's description of sociology as based on a kind of 'conceptual imperialism' and

argues for a women-centred perspective, 'which will substitute for abstract concepts a new kind of knowledge, grounded in experience and doing justice to the complexity of human existence...' (Smith (1974 p8) cited Wolff, 1990 p76).

Such concerns influenced my 'writing' of the question. The language used in its formulation had to take into account these problems of potential oppression and resultant silencing.¹ I had to question my questioning in an effort to actively avoid the possibilities of prescription and authority.

At this early stage, I also began to recognise the conscious and unconscious aspects of my decision-making, admitting that my process was initially composed of intuitive choices that I later understood to be culturally and linguistically significant. Bakhtin describes language as 'not a neutral medium that passes freely and easily into the private property of the speaker's intention'. I recognised that the language I use is haunted by an unconsciousness, which is externally given, which is in Bakhtin's terms 'over populated with the intentions of others' (Bakhtin and Holquist (Eds.) 1981, p293). The difficulty of working with such an inscribed unconsciousness had to be not only admitted, but also accommodated in my process and I turned to the writing of Denise Riley for help. She confirmed that language, 'also works at the pervasive level of its musculature, quietly but powerfully, through its grammatical and syntactic joints' (Riley, 2000 p3). It was necessary to go back to some of the versions of my question, which I had arrived at intuitively, and to submit them to the filter of the observations of Bakhtin, Riley and others.

¹ See later sections *Talk* and *Speak* for further discussion.

You

I re-examined some of my initial intuitive formulations for the question and rejected many of them in favour of one that addressed the questioned directly (you), clearly soliciting an individual response. I did this after recognising that posing any question could imply not only an answer, but also potentially a correct answer. My interviewees might assume that I had an ideal response, which they could only guess at, only do their best, in some ignorance, to supply. I wanted to avoid a situation where they might be left feeling they had failed according to rules that were out of their control. To clearly solicit a personal response seemed one way of working against these dangers.

I was also inviting each woman to become a speaking subject. I was responding here to Irigaray's request that women situate themselves as the 'I' as the subject when talking to other women.² I did this whilst being simultaneously conscious of the dangers and difficulties inherent in the adoption of such a position.³

² See discussion in 'Revisiting *Écriture Féminine*' pp129-150.

³ See later sections Talk and Speak for further discussion.

What is it?

I also tried to avoid any obfuscation of my intent to question, by prefacing this direct address with an obvious and familiar format for a question (What is it?).

The verb in this opening format is present tense, soliciting a response which reflects the interviewee's current thinking. One writer went further and treated the instruction 'Please consider the above question for two weeks' as an invitation to keep a diary for fourteen days. Her present tense account was prefaced by the question re-ordered into grammatically 'correct' form: 'Of what do I wish to speak?'. This revised question also involved the substitution of 'I' for 'you'. First person, plus diary form, now equalled a personal account. My question had effectively been changed into the equivalent of, 'what do I have to say about myself?'. This assumption that the question was an invitation to what Denise Riley calls 'self-description' (Riley, 2000 p22) proved a common interpretation. The 'it' in the question was often ignored in favour of 'I'. In searching for reasons for this particular re-framing of the question, I observe that our cultural climate often invites acts of confession, seeing them as therapeutic and treating them with some seriousness as investigations designed to uncover the elusive 'truth' of selfhood. Retallack is particularly critical of women's writing which concentrates on what she describes as 'therapeutic exposures' (Retallack in Keller and Miller (Eds.) 1994 p348) and Denise Riley also suggests that anyone faced with an invitation to engage in such an exercise

might resort to deliberate or inadvertent self-historicisation. A strategy resulting from a 'drive to an impossible authenticity or integrity [...] which comes to a head over some unrealised ethics of authorship'. Riley further suggests that this crisis may induce an 'urge to dedramatise the described self' 'a longing for transparency, to be without qualities' (Riley, 2000 p31).

I have included below four examples, which illustrate some of these struggles for authenticity and which, to some degree, engage with this process of self-historicisation. They also further suggest that such a crisis of authorship, as well as resulting in inability, or difficulty, can even produce a form of speechlessness.

It is hard to describe what I mean, but a connection between grief and transparency increasingly preoccupies me. From early adolescence I had the sensation of being almost invisible like a ghost sliding around with no discernable imprint, haunting my own life. That feeling lasted for many years and fed the fantasy of a series of parallel lives. But recently something different has been happening, and I find myself disturbingly present in my life.

Maggie (e mailed response)

day one, of fourteen.....an odyssey....

of what do i wish to speak?

i wish to speak....yet i cannot, for years i have swallowed words with beer and with red wine, why? because I am afraid.....some of the voice i swallowed emerges....in bars as shocked (i say shocked but, rendered speechless, may be more accurate).

Ruth (e mailed response)

Whose knowing am I spokesperson for?

Is me a mistaken identity?

Sarah (written response)

..... this felt just very fundamental to me – yes – this is what I'm about in my life – you know – I'm not saying anything sensational or exciting, or fascinating or anything....but this is just.....

Ros (videoed response)

It is useful to note here Joan Retallack's criticism of what she describes as the 'Anglo-American approach to the domain of women's silence'. As I have already said she is critical of the 'therapeutic exposures' approach. She is particularly sceptical about the 'narrative family of woman albums' version of this approach. It is a strategy which she describes as 'characterized by the pathos of what has become, in our female captivity narratives, an emblematic, institutional-ized/izable, capital S Silence' and she goes on to describe this silence as 'metaphorically transmuted into invisibility, but still hissing in the mind's ear' and accuses it of being a silence that

inhabits all our tedious pressions, locus of a sinister and insidious absence of power – of having been (passive voice) oppressed, suppressed, repressed, depressed, compressed, impressed to the point of participating in our own belittling scorn. (Retallack, 1994 p348) ⁴

Wish

I ask of writing what I ask of desire: that it have no relationship with the logic that puts desire on the side of possession, acquisition, consummation–consumption which so gloriously pushed to the end, links (mis)knowledge with death. I do not think that writing – as production of desire, where desire is capable of everything – can be, or has to be, defined through the border of death.

(Cixous (1974) trans. Conley, 1991 p15) ⁵

A desire was seeking its home. I was that desire. I was the question. (Cixous (1977) 1991 p1)

⁴ I make more reference to Retallack's position and criticism of 'enlightenment' practice pplxxiv-lxxv.

⁵ From *Prénoms de personne*, Cixous (1974) p5.

The word 'wish' was chosen in preference to 'want' as it contained within it the possibility of desire.⁶ In her essay *Coming to Writing*, Cixous plays on the difference between desire and want,

A Girl Is Being Killed

In the beginning, I desired.

"What is it she wants?"

"To live. Just to live. And to hear myself say the name."

"Horrors! Cut out her tongue!"

"What's wrong with her?"

"She can't keep herself from flying!"

"In that case, we have special cages." (Cixous, 1991 p8)

One does not want upon a star, one wishes upon it. To wish is to allow one's self to think beyond the possible, or what one has been conditioned to think is possible.

Desire slowly emanates from what is inadmissible in her project: transformations of the self, and the collectivity. Inadmissible will to change life, to change her life. Imperatives with regard to what in the environment appears intolerable. (Brossard (1985) 1988 p67)

It could also be suggested that the word 'wish' contains the notion of action driven by a range of avenues, which inhabit the arena of the projected possible. We speak of a 'wish' list rather than a 'want' list. Here is a desire for something that we do not yet know is achievable, only that it is hoped for, perhaps even longed for. Implicit is the sense that the current situation is less than, or different to, the desired.

⁶ I was also conscious of those psychoanalytic theories that deal with notions of lack and desire. Lacan for instance identifies lack as crucial to the human psyche. He describes the child seeing its mirror image, a complete whole self, which is in contrast to the fragmented self actually experienced. The child desires this wholeness and from this metaphor Lacan extrapolates a notion of desire which arises out of the primary separation between food and love experienced by the weaned child, who subsequently attempts to close this 'hole' in the self with a search for perfection that is never achieved or fully realised. He suggests that absence or lack is implicit in subjectivity and in the adoption of language. You only need words when the object you want is not present.

Once imagine that woman imagines and the object loses its fixed
obsessional character. (Irigaray in Moi, 1987 p133)

'Wish' contains a sense of yearning and the possibility of change, either
on the part of him or her who wishes, or a change in context, in cultural
feasibility.

*I thought that it was a feminist question and what it triggered in my
mind was Freud's question to do with what women want and I felt here was a
woman saying, 'well come on girls, what do we want and what do we want to
talk about?' and I felt that was useful.* Jenni (videoed response)

*It's just the word wish I suppose... what I wish to speak about might not
be the same thing as what I want to speak about because wish has got some
magical connotation.* Cat (videoed response)

Mary Eagleton suggests that, 'because female desire, what women want,
is so repressed or so misrepresented in a phallogentric society, its expression
becomes a key location for deconstructing that control' (Eagleton, 1989 p205).
And Kristeva gives a psychoanalytic description of desire which describes it as
'the desire of the Other' and which includes the subject as 'divided and always
in movement'. She goes on to explain that,

Because the subject is desiring, he is the subject of a practice,
which itself can be carried out only to the extent that its domain – the
"real" – is impossible since it is beyond the "principle ironically called
pleasure".

Kristeva claims that 'both desire and practice exist solely on the basis of
language: desire is "produced.... by an animal at the mercy of language..."
(Lacan, Ecrits quoted in Kristeva (1974) 1984 p131).

When discussing film, Laurie Shrage gives an example of the result of
this relationship between desire and subjectivity, arguing that the frustration of

female desire focuses an audience's attention on the inequitable nature of particular social institutions, enabling a feminist critique of those institutions.

Shrage claims that films that show the central female character as determining

.....her own identity through transgression and desire in a search for an independent existence beyond and outside the discourse of the male' disrupt the hegemony of a male discourse or system of representation by allowing space for the counter hegemonic discourse of women (Shrage citing Johnston (1975 p4) in Hein and Korsmeyer (Eds.) 1993 p145)

In these films the audience is witness to the problems of the central female character, the difficulties she experiences in attempting to achieve her desires: the contradictory and morally dubious territory she has to enter, in order to pursue those desires.

My attempt to offer women a forum in which to articulate their desires contains this notion of the potentially transgressive nature of female desire.

It is also cognisant of those theories of gendered language put forward by Luce Irigaray. She claims 'that women's desire most likely does not speak the same language as man's desire in that it has been covered over by the logic that has dominated the West since the Greeks'. Irigaray identifies this difference in language as having its roots in the different erotic experience of men and women, describing the prevalence of the gaze, the discrimination of form and individualization of form as being particularly foreign to female eroticism. She suggests that, because women act as the subject of men's desire and are also responsible for its maintenance and revival, they are liable to neglect their own desire and become unaware of it 'at least not explicitly'

Irigaray maintains that women desire at the same time nothing and everything and ascribes a multiple nature to both female desire and language, claiming that when a woman dares to speak out she 'retouches herself constantly'

She just barely separates from herself some chatter, an exclamation, a half-secret, a sentence left in suspense – When she returns to it, it is only to set out again from another point of pleasure or pain. One must listen to her differently in order to hear an "other meaning" *which is constantly in the process of weaving itself, at the same time ceaselessly embracing words and yet casting them off to avoid becoming fixed, immobilized.* Moreover, her statements are never identical to anything. Their distinguishing feature is one of contiguity. They touch (upon). And when they wander too far from this nearness, she stops and begins again from "zero": her body-sex organ.' (Irigaray (1977) in Marks and deCourtivron, p107)

Irigaray is linking desire and pleasure and language, drawing our attention to the fact that women are doubly desirous in their wish to speak of their desire and their wish to find a language capable of expressing it. One of my respondents made similar observations:

I think it's not so much about sexuality as such, but about desire, that it's still.... it's.... men's desire is acceptable, women's desire is... somehow... still.... I mean, you.... you think about films like Fatal Attraction and whatever and it's totally mythologized and I think it's something that really eats at... most of the women I know have questions and issues that they talk to other women about in relation to desire and sexuality and I don't mean just heterosexual.... it's something that happens in that engagement of desire... that post Lacanian.... I'm really going off at a tangent here...'

People are still talking about women's orgasm as if nothing was known... you almost get this feeling that somehow women haven't talked about sexuality.... really – I mean women have talked about sexuality in that lesbians and feminists have talked about sexuality, but somehow you still feel that we have gone from this unspeakable, unmentionable and unknown sexuality which is – (I'm not even sure that that's really true, but in terms of what we imagine it was like in the first part of the twentieth century when psychoanalysis comes along and starts to discover sexuality as something that is very important in terms of our drives and our being) – to the kind of Cosmo, kind of how to shag

your boyfriend, to Sex in the City and it seems to be like a very strange kind of leap when what hasn't been spoken about is still not spoken about...

Ruth (videoed response)

In the use of 'wish' rather than 'want' I was attempting to recognise the existence of these desires, to work against the layers of cultural and linguistic sedimentation that distance women historically from the possibility of an active, conscious state of desire. I was searching for a linguistic invitation, which might lead my interviewees to that vitality of language described by Morrison in her 1993 Nobel lecture on Literature. Here she states,

the vitality of language lies in its ability to limn the actual, imagined and possible lives of its speakers, readers, writers.... it arcs toward the place where meaning may lie.... its force, its felicity, is in its reach towards the ineffable. (Morrison in Butler, 1997 p6)

Less positively, but also equally importantly, in preferring 'wish' to 'want' I was avoiding a noun often used to describe a lack, as in, for example, 'For want of a nail, the shoe was lost.' In this context 'want' suggests something perhaps forgotten and in the above adage there is also the implication of slovenliness, of something not supplied when it ought to have been, promoting a sense of guilt easily linked to a deficit in service, or care.

Speak

It is time for women to start scoring their feats in written and oral language. Every woman has known the torment of getting up to speak. Her heart racing, at times entirely lost for words, ground and language slipping away – that's how daring a feat, how great a transgression it is for a woman to speak – even just open her mouth – in public.

(Cixous (1975) 1976 p881)

My identification with the above description was part of an intuitive choice to use the word 'speak' rather than 'say'. This choice was further supported by everyday observation of the relatively few women who write for performance. Virginia Woolf (1929) 1979) describes the woman who keeps a private journal or diary, the woman who writes essentially in secret. These women who write for the private page alone are less scarce historically, than women who write for public consumption, and the situation is still unsatisfactory. Dinah Birch identifies two particular areas of difficulty when she says,

It remains true that women have found poetry an order of discourse in which general acknowledgement has been harder to come by than it has in fiction – and when we come to drama, things get more difficult still.

She attributes this latter difficulty partly to the commercial nature of playwriting, but also to the fact that the theatre is 'an unremittingly public place and plays have very often concerned themselves with public action' (Birch in Bonner et al, 1992 p45). In a paper for Feminist Review Michelene Wandor expands on this point, suggesting reasons why the woman playwright is seen as a threat.

...she provides a text and meanings which others must follow. In her own voice, refracted through the dialogue and structure of the play, she communicates to her audience. She also controls the voices of others. She gives the performers the words which they must speak. Such control of a multiple set of voices, and the public control of an imaginative world [...] makes the woman playwright a far greater threat than the female novelist to the carefully maintained dominance of men as the custodians of public cultural creation. (Wandor in Eagleton (Ed) 1989 p104)

Joan Swann (in Bonner et al, 1992) provides evidence of some of the reasons why women may experience a problem with the act of making public, when she describes the historical debarring of women from public office, from the opportunity to practice their public speaking skills without prejudice. She uses the example of St. Paul's dictates against women speaking out and the ridicule experienced by early Quakers who sanctioned women's democratic right to speak at meetings.

Cora Kaplan too elaborates on this private/public divide by quoting Elizabeth Browning's poem *Aurora Leigh*⁷ in support of her contention that women are educated into a level of 'verbal imprisonment' (Kaplan in Cameron, 1998 p63).

I read a score of books on womanhood
.....books that boldly assert
Their right of comprehending husband's talk
When not too deep, and even of answering
With pretty 'may it please you', or 'so it is', –
Their rapid insight and fine aptitude,
Particular worth and general missionariness,
As long as they keep quiet by the fire
And never say 'no' when the world says 'ay',
....their, in brief,
Potential faculty in everything
Of abdicating power in it. (Aurora Leigh)

Birch (in Bonner et al. 1992) would seem to agree when she gives more detail on women's lack of engagement with poetry. Birch claims that part of the problem stems from the fact that poetry occupies a privileged position within the Western literary tradition. She reminds us that it has its origins in classical

⁷ See also reference to Browning plv.

culture and points out that Sappho is the only female example of this classical tradition regularly cited. Birch believes that this combines with the historical debarring of women from a classical education, to render them ill equipped to compete with their male counterparts. Kaplan agrees with Birch's overall contention that poetry contains a particular problem for women and adds another set of reasons located in a disjuncture between the formation of their 'human' and artistic identities,

...to be a woman and a poet presents many women with such a profound split between their social, sexual identity (their 'human' identity) and their artistic practice that the split becomes the insistent subject, sometimes overt, often hidden or displaced, of much women's poetry. (Kaplan in Cameron, 1998 p55)

One of my respondents, a poet, had this to say on the subject:

I write because it is quieter and private.

I need to make sounds to make me feel bigger.

My desire to make sound is penetrative.

*It is male in me. It is me trying to get out
of my body, into another space,
and shoot, dump, offer, commune the things I burst
with.*

There is the possibility of Fertilisation.

Anonymity. Action. Conflict. Song. Joining.

Responsibility. Calling. Emptiness to start all over.

*Being known, loved, played with, held, made
beautiful. Buried.*

It is a risk to speak, but not to talk.

It is a risk

To hear myself hearing.

Sarah (written response)

Cixous is inclined to lay part of the blame for this inhibition of women writers and speakers at the feet of an unsympathetic male audience:

A double distress, for even if she transgresses, her words fall almost always upon the deaf male ear, which hears in language only that which speaks in the masculine. (Cixous (1975) 1976 p881)

She is clearly identifying speaking in public as a problem particular to women and is also supporting Irigaray's proposition that the problem is one of a divergence or difference in language. However, in the chapter, 'La Parole Soufflée' from *Writing and Difference*, Derrida quotes Artaud usefully and extensively on the subject of speaking out, reminding us that Artaud too wrote that,

all speech fallen from the body, offering itself to understanding or reception, offering itself as spectacle, immediately becomes stolen speech. Becomes a signification which I do not possess because it is a signification.

Derrida continues by quoting Artaud on 'unpower': 'inspired' by (the simple impotence, the sterility of having "nothing to say") or nothing which can be said 'in my own name'.⁸ Artaud writes to Jacques Rivière of 'not knowing who speaks at the moment when, and in the place where I proffer my speech' (Artaud cited in Derrida, 1978 pp175-177).

We can find a source for this crisis of subject and speech in the work of Lacan, who describes the entrance to language as requiring fundamental adjustments in the nature of the subject. In *Excitable Speech* Judith Butler describes an explicit link between the acquisition of language and unspeakability when she says,

⁸ See also Joan Retallack's definition of 'inspiration' in her essay :re:thinking:literary:feminism which means 'to be filled with someone else's breath; breath that without an accompanying principle of action expires into fantasy identification with idealized models'. (Retallack, 1997 p352)

Moreover, as Lacan and Lacanians have argued, that entrance into language comes at a price: the norms that govern the inception of the speaking subject differentiate the subject from the unspeakable, that is, produce an unspeakability as the condition of subject formation.

(Butler, 1997 p135). ⁹

Irigaray too continues to urge us to 'go on questioning words as the wrapping with which the "subject" modestly, clothes the "female"'. She refers to a situation where,

...stifled beneath all those eulogistic or denigratory metaphors, she [woman] is unable to unpick the seams of her disguise.....ever more hemmed in, cathected by tropes, how could she articulate any sound from beneath this cheap chivalric finery? How find a voice, make a choice strong enough, subtle enough to cut through those layers of ornamental style, that decorative sepulchre, where even her breath is lost.

(Irigaray, 1985 p143)

Butler believes that this crucial moment of entry into language can be re-invoked in political life, when the ability to speak is again crucial to the subject's survival. She suggests that the re-invocation of this moment remains a continuing dynamic in the life of the subject, indeed that the re-structuring of that subject is never fully complete and that any transgressive or unacceptable speech attempted by the subject attacks its viability. Dinah Birch too describes this threat when she says that,

...in taking up the culturally defined role of women, therefore, the growing girl can only claim the power of public speech at the expense of fracturing the internalised process that gives her a position within her society'

(Birch, 1992 p51)

Retallack similarly describes her moment of complicity as,

⁹ Joan Retallack also criticises Butler's implicit acceptance of the normative status of the 'intelligible and therefore the constraints of a binary textual code.' (Retallack, 1997 p346)

...a situation in which the little girl's assumed complicity in the patriarchal construction of the 'eternal feminine' means she must simultaneously valorise and relinquish her femaleness as both agent and object of desire. (Retallack in Keller and Miller, 1994 p361)

In the light of these observations my construction of an invitation to speak in public becomes a considerable responsibility. Judith Butler only adds to my reservations when she writes that,

A subject who speaks at the border of the speakable takes the risk of redrawing the distinction between what is and is not speakable, the risk of being cast out into the unspeakable. (Butler, 1997 p139)

My trepidation was such that I had to return to the writing of Denise Riley for some confirmation that what I was attempting to do was not only legitimate, but could have positive results.

Riley (2000) is unperturbed by a lack of fit between her self-description as a social subject and her presence as a political subject; she accepts that the subject of political language requires an impersonality and non-identity. She is similarly phlegmatic about the problems of displacement within language claiming that this can offer 'democratic freedoms' and she cites verbal irony as an example. It is a position re-iterated and supported by Rae Armantrout discussing women's lack of engagement with experimental writing. She too describes women's difficult access to the symbolic order as containing an opportunity to observe the ways in which the identity is constructed and to be therefore 'in a position to challenge the contemporary poetic convention of the unified voice' (Armantrout (1978) in Beach, 1998 p288).

Somewhat reassured, I nevertheless decided to further my examination of the word 'speak'. I noted that when we extend speak into the phrase to 'speak for oneself' there is an implication of self-justification which admits the possibilities of displacement and self-examination described above. I also observed that once 'speak' was extended to 'speaking' and once this extended form was connected to other words, potential inhibitors to carefree vocalisation did become evident. 'Speak up' is a phrase often used by those in authority, who demand this action from an unwilling supplicant. These authority figures may pretend not to be able to hear in order to imply incredulousness; an inability to believe what they are hearing. Or they may require a louder rendition merely to embarrass the speaker by demonstrating a hierarchy. But, in other circumstances, 'speaking up' could imply a voice that insists on being heard, on identifying itself as having something particular or different to say. 'Speaking up' could suggest a voice that seeks power, dominance and defiance; that actively wishes to transgress.

Joan Swan describes the sanctions on these potentially transgressive voices as even extending to the private sphere. She identifies those derogatory terms used to censor such private speech, terms such as 'gossip and nag', which are also used as descriptive nouns¹⁰ (Swan in Bonner et al, 1992 p4).

Extending the phrase further to 'speaking up in public' has the effect of taking the speaker out of the private domain and I have already identified the

¹⁰ See later discussion under the section 'Talk' pp107-108 and for a more extensive list of derogative terminology see the cover of the collected texts – *What is it you Wish to Speak of?* included in Appendix Two pplxxxii.

potential and resulting difficulties here. Another version, 'speaking up for one's self' might suggest that link between self and utterance, also already discussed.

The Oxford English Dictionary defines 'speaking out' as 'freely and unreservedly'. The phrase 'speaking out' can imply against some existing wrong, and encompasses both the notion of a hegemonic norm and a voice raised louder than the norm. When the phrase is again extended to 'speaking out of place' these problems expand to contain and make more explicit the questions of private and public context and formal and informal language.

The following text spoken as part of a videoed interview illustrates some of these issues.

I was going to voice lessons and my teacher said I should go to a speech therapist, she said that something was not quite right. So I went to see the speech and language therapist and I had an endoscopy – a strobe light put down my throat – and it was one of the most wonderful experiences because the larynx is such a beautiful organ. It's whitish, it was projected onto a computer screen and it was like getting to know an intimate part of myself. It reminded me of when I was twenty and things hadn't been going too well with boyfriends and someone invited me to look at my vagina. I didn't want to do it, because I had always been led to believe that I was ugly, that that part of me was dirty. And I can remember being overwhelmed by its beauty. The larynx looked like that too. It was quite emotional. And the speech therapist said, 'Well actually your larynx looks fine, better than most singers.' She said, I'm sure this is an emotional problem'. And I thought, this is my past, which I have tried to get away from but which keeps coming back in different forms. The voice is so connected with the emotions.

When I wanted to express myself on stage, which is a thing I love to do most, something would happen to my voice. And other people would pick up on that and feel uncomfortable and that would interfere with what I wanted to be a joyous and expressive moment. I'd been looking back at how I interpreted something that happened to me, visually, as if I had put on a pair of sunglasses. It affected how I saw the whole world. Seeing my larynx like that was like taking off the sunglasses.

In my childhood the physical attacks were often around my throat, I was held by the throat and scared to scream, not able to speak, silenced in that

moment. At these times I developed the ability to step outside myself, to see my physical body as a very silent place. That happened on stage when I wanted to express emotion, any emotion, when I wanted to be sexy, I could watch myself, from off stage and not remember what happened on stage, it was too scary to be sexual on stage, to feel myself as a sexual being. It not only affects my singing voice, but also my speaking voice...my ability to say anything about sex...to communicate anything about sex. I could not experience sex and keep communicating. So it was important to be able to go into my body and say this is beautiful.

One year my father bought the 'Grundig' tape to tape machine for Christmas and he invited us all to speak on the tape as children and one of my brothers stutters and the other didn't know what to say, but there was all this insistence, he wanted us to talk and you can hear my mother.... my mother was always so angry with me, she thought I was a wicked changeling¹¹, that I was to blame for her marriage break up, that I was the one. Yes, she was mad at me as a child and on this tape I can hear my mother saying to me, 'OK, so what have you got to say for yourself?' And I said, 'I've got nothing to say.' I remember thinking I'm not going to talk to you if you are going to talk to me like that. So we had this little clash – What are you going to say for yourself? As if I had already done something wrong. And in the process of re-hearing it I thought what a sweet, positive, strong voice, saying, 'I have got nothing to say.' Or saying I have got nothing else to say. But on the flip side, I realised I had stopped saying *anything*; I had stopped expressing part of me.'

Susan (videoed response)

Talk

The young woman, who was in her late twenties, turned from the group, coming closer to Felix and the doctor. She rested her hands behind her against the table. She seemed embarrassed. 'Are you both really saying what you mean, or are you just talking?'

(Barnes (1930) 1998 p16)

Another option might have been substitution of the word 'talk' for the word 'speak'. Extended into a phrase 'talk' suggests (even requires) 'want' rather than 'wish'. And the phrase 'What is it you want to talk of?' transposed

¹¹ King Lear, Act 1 scene 1 refers to Cordelia as a changeling.

into more acceptable phraseology quickly converts into 'What do you want to talk about?', substituting 'about' for 'of'.

'Talk' might also suggest a context that would exclude formal language, the verb 'talk' being more usually associated with everyday conversation between two people or amongst a group. For instance 'the talking cure'¹² is a phrase used to describe group therapy techniques where participants talk freely and intimately about themselves and we often use the phrase 'talking over' or 'talking through' to suggest a conversational method of investigating a set of issues, with the implication that this may release information or the solution to a problem

One of my respondents used the word 'talk' whilst denigrating her ability to speak at length:

*Well there's a hundred and one things I can talk about,
I can talk forever about anything.* (Jo, videoed response)

Generalisations about women's conversation often describe them as more able to talk at length, or more intimately than men. Contained within these observations is often an implication that this 'talk' is of a certain kind, hence the frequent use of the word 'gossip' or 'nag' in relation to women.

'Talk' is often shaded with similar criticism. There is an implication that 'talk' is 'just chat', an appellation which might suggest that it is frivolous, of no account, less valuable.¹³

¹² Freud and Breuer originally coined the term 'talking cure' referring to their work with the patient Anna O.

¹³ See also pp130-131 and p167.

In choosing the word 'speak' instead of 'talk', I was attempting to suggest that certain responses were not only possible but were positive options. I was encoding in my invitation the possibility of transgression, in the knowledge that an invitation which contained such possibilities could be interpreted as legitimating, or at least supporting, that activity.

Of

I made an intuitive decision to use this preposition after 'speaking' in preference to 'about' because I understood 'of' to suggest the discursive rather than the descriptive. For me 'about' has an association with 'around' – for example in the phrase 'around and about'. 'About' could suggest, through this association, an activity that does not fully approach its subject, but which circles (perhaps ineffectually) around it. 'Of' contained the notion that whatever is to be said already exists, is already operational in some way and that the speaker, or writer is engaging in a process of finding it.

I also chose 'of' because it conforms to a more formal notion of language, it has, quoting Ruth, the potential for more 'momentousness'.

Virginia Woolf argues that men write more formally than women 'using nominalizations (grandeur, argument) rather than verbs or adjectives' (Woolf, 1965 cited Mills, 1995 p47). Cora Kaplan expands on Woolf's position when she observes that a very high proportion of women's poems are about the right to speak and write. Kaplan suggests this interest amounts to recognition of 'the

value and importance of high language' and she writes at length of the erosion of women's use of this 'high' language (Kaplan, 1998 p55). Kaplan attributes this erosion to the role of social silence in the constitution of female identity: 'Silence gives the proper grace to women' (*Ajax* by Sophocles, cited Kaplan, 1998 p62) and gives examples of sanctions against women including the inhibition of female obscenity when represented in telling dirty jokes and the use of wit. She also refers to Elizabeth Barrett Browning's *Aurora Leigh*¹⁴ and its criticism of women's education as learning, which prohibits their advancement into public language.

Kaplan cites women writers from the seventeenth century onwards who describe the suppression of women's speech and writing, eventually coming to the conclusion that 'the language most emphatically denied to women is the most concentrated form of symbolic language – poetry'. Kaplan is making similar claims to Judith Butler and Dinah Birch, when she describes this denial as connected with

.... the way in which women become social beings in the first place, so that the very condition of their accession to their own subjectivity, to the consciousness of a self which is both personal and public is their unwitting acceptance of the law which limits their speech.
(Kaplan, 1998 p63)

By opening her response to my question in the following way, one woman, a poet, seems to acknowledge many of these complications:

*Deep blue across the shoulders. Midnight is coming.
Now a chill.
A breeze disturbs these gags and veils and witty net curtains.*

¹⁴ See also Browning on 'verbal imprisonment' pxliv.

Giddiness

as that question opens into the other question:

How would I know?

Except by disturbance. A greying over.

Fainting away from cackle.

AND HOW WOULD I KNOW IT WAS MY KNOWING?

*What else's knowing lodges in my will
and desire, prompting, fooling,
disguising – tightening the gags,
thickening the veils, fluttering the
nets? Making me wholly white, 21st
century, not a refugee, a buyer of
crisps and milk, obsessive, clocked,
working, carpeted, unanswerable.*

Whose knowing am I spokesperson for?

Is 'me' a mistaken identity?

*What moves in me (so stealthy)
that I am bound
in compliances I cannot apprehend
except through near-death processes
of backward disappearance?*

*As if in coming to earth I was
fitted with a lifesbagworth of saying.
And when it is empty I die.*

And how would I know?

Why would I let that happen?

*Is there a moment of giving up?
What for?*

Can it be revoked?

Is this tosh?

(Sarah, written response)

Returning again to my reading of *écriture féminine*, one can see it as a determined effort to establish a use of language, which operates outside any established and potentially delimiting definitions of language or genre. There are critics of this position¹⁵, but despite many reservations, I recognise that I intuitively used 'of' rather than 'about' in an attempt to offer an opportunity for my respondents to speak with some formality, to enter symbolic territory, to be discursive rather than descriptive. In Rachael Blau DuPlessis's terms, I wanted them to have the opportunity to engage with writing (or speaking) not as personality, but as praxis¹⁶ (Blau DuPlessis, 1990 p172).

Body

'To use the body of the woman, her image or person is not impossible, but problematic for feminism'
(Kelly, cited Betterton, 1987 p206)¹⁷

Women have for centuries been subject/ed to the literature of images – from literary and romance novels to Romantic poetry to movie and fashion magazines. Mostly we have been left with a damaged self-image – a static projection of incompetence and inadequacy, and paralysis – having no sense of how to get from "here" (flawed self) to "there" (idealized image).

(Retallack in Keller and Miller (Eds.) 1994 p352)

I am in my body and my body is in me.

(Cixous, 1991 p47)

¹⁵ See more discussion in 'Revisiting *Écriture Féminine*' pp123-139.

¹⁶ David Birch in *The Language of Theatre* describes praxis as a process of analysis and action designed to bring about change. 'Praxis is both the action and process which establishes what we, as people and social institutions, do, and what we do is determined discursively, i.e. by the various means we have of making meaning, among them the use of language (written or spoken)' (1991 p19).

Writing on the Body (1997), a text which discusses female embodiment and feminist theory, opens by saying,

At first glance, the answer to Simone de Beauvoir's question – "what is a woman?" (1977) appears simple, for is the female body not the marker of womanhood? The body has, however, been at the centre of feminist theory precisely because it offers no such "natural" foundation for our pervasive cultural assumptions about femininity. Indeed there is a tension between women's lived bodily experiences and the cultural meanings inscribed on the female body that always mediate those experiences. Historically, women have been determined by their bodies: their individual awakenings and actions, their pleasure and their pain compete with representations of the female body in larger social frameworks. When we ask, "What is a woman," we are really asking questions about ideology: about how discourse has contoured the category of "woman" and about what is at stake – politically, economically and socially – in maintaining or dismissing that category. (Conboy, Medina, Stanbury (Eds.) 1997 p1)¹⁸

Any attempt to analyse and deconstruct the way women are viewed begins to release some of the ideological questions raised by John Berger as early as the 1980s when he states,

To be born a woman has been to be born, within an allotted and confined space, into the keeping of men. The social presence of women has developed as a result of their ingenuity in living under such tutelage within such a limited space. But this has been at the cost of a woman's self being split into two. A woman must continually watch herself. She is almost continually accompanied by her own image of herself. Whilst she is walking across a room or whilst she is weeping at the death of her father, she can scarcely avoid envisaging herself walking or weeping. From earliest childhood she has been taught and persuaded to survey herself continually. And so she comes to consider the surveyor and the surveyed within her as the two constituent yet always distinct elements of her identity as a woman. (Berger, 1981 p46)

¹⁸ de Beauvoir cites Merleau-Ponty's description of the body as 'an historical idea' rather than 'a natural species'. She refers to his statement that 'Woman is not a completed reality but a becoming'. (Merleau-Ponty (1962) cited de Beauvoir (1949)1972 p66.

In her chapter *Reinstating Corporeality*, Janet Wolff agrees with Berger and goes on to describe the results of this internalised male gaze, citing self-surveillance and its associated self-censorship and oppression as activities that originate through the body (Wolff, 1990 pp120-141).

Peggy Phelan also adds to Berger's observations and introduces the word 'mark/ed', 'He is the norm and therefore unremarkable: as the other, it is she whom he marks'¹⁹, as a way of describing this surveillance which women experience both externally and internally. DuPlessis too uses the word 'marked' when describing a woman writer as,

.....a 'marked marker' doubly marked. She is marked by the cultural attributes of Woman, gender, sexuality, the feminine, a whole bolus of contradictory representations, which are as much her cultural inscription as ours. She is marked by being variously distinguished defined, singled out – by her gender. Others may note it even if she does not, or claims not to. (DuPlessis, 1990 p161)

But whilst Phelan sees woman's 'markedness', her visibility, as a trap, commenting ironically that 'if representational visibility equals power then almost naked young white women should be running Western Culture' (Phelan, 1993 p5-6), DuPlessis tells us that as a 'marked marker' a woman may not, or need not, be circumscribed or limited by gender. DuPlessis is, however, prepared to admit that women are 'affected' by their gender and claims that 'Marks of these gender narratives can be made legible in feminist readings' (DuPlessis, 1990 p161).

¹⁹ See later use of the term 'marked' by Emilyn Claid in this section plxvii.

In *Making a Difference* Gayle Greene and Coppelia Kahn take these arguments further when they remind us that, 'the trouble with woman is that she is at once an object of desire and an object of exchange...' (Greene and Kahn, p1985 p61). They quote Levi-Strauss as describing woman as a person and a sign, a human being and a depersonalised, subjectless structure.

In suggesting that women could elect to respond to my question on video, I had to take on this difficult dualism and referred to Greene and Kahn's response to Levi-Strauss's description of women as either a person or a relational sign. Greene and Kahn observe that Levi-Strauss bases such a description on the notion that marriage is a form of human communication, which builds a system of reciprocity. This system strengthens and creates links with other families to form the basis for social communities. They describe Levi-Strauss as likening the way marriage communicates between groups to a linguistic system. In his terms the exchange of women is equivalent to the circulation of words.

But whilst describing women as operating in this way, at the level of a sign, further reading reveals that Levi-Strauss also observes that she 'could never become just a sign and nothing more, since even in a man's world she is still a person, and since in so far she is defined as a sign she must be recognised as a generator of signs' (Levi-Strauss, 1969 p496). Greene and Kahn also provide some hope when they observe that woman can be described as, 'A

transcendental being, a consciousness and a voice 'taking her part in the duet' (Greene and Kahn, 1985 p 61).

But even armed with this positive perspective, my researches confirmed that I needed to remain alert to the dangers that accompany any moment of display of the female body. These dangers are succinctly expressed by Janet Wolff when she states that, 'women are closer (too close) to the body compared with men' (Wolff, 1990 p126).

How could I work against or ameliorate the dangers of the delimitation, repression and marginalization of the female body that potentially accompanied my invitation to women to speak 'on camera'? One solution might be to return to the concept of transgression. Just placing women of any age, occupation, shape and size in front of the camera could be understood as an act of transgression. Judith Butler (1990) argues for a view of 'woman' as no longer either universal or unified, working against any potential reductive or essentialist definition and instead insisting on a fluidity of both sexual and gendered identities. She refers to Mary Russo's female grotesque (Russo, 1994) and suggests that the grotesque body provides a positive alternative to a classical body, devoid of orifices or sexuality. Russo's grotesque, uncontained body challenges this classical body, which Butler describes as monumental, contained and identified with the sphere of masculinity. Janet Wolff asks,

What happens when the female body is affirmed and displayed in defiance of the dominant ideals of 'the perfect body' acknowledging the reality of actual women, the diversities of shape and size, the functions of corporeal existence? (Wolff, 1990 p128)

She too goes on to use Mary Russo's term 'grotesque body' to describe this image and describes such a body as able to resist the objectifying gaze.

Using this definition, the women responding to my question should be immune from objectification, but as Wolff reminds us, such a transgression can also put these women, 'in excess of the idealized feminine', in danger as they 'operate as threat (as well as example to other women)'. A situation that Wolff warns us 'can reaffirm the status quo, providing licensed but limited occasions for transgressions which are guaranteed to be neutralized' (Wolff, 1990 p129).

A method of affirmation had to be found that would not fall into this trap and I gain some assistance from Catherine King. In her paper *The Politics of Repression, A democracy of the Gaze*, she describes 'safe' forms of objectification: 'which ensure that the viewers realise that the one who has been represented is an individual with will, with autonomous desires and powers, with a specific personality and with human rights and dignity'. She suggests that a test for any artist requiring women to enter into a moment of self-display or performance, might be to ask if they would be willing to represent themselves in this way. The artist should ask the question, 'does this objectification render the subjecthood of the person: their ability to be the author, or representer, too?' King adds that, as a way of ensuring that this democracy of approach is in place, women could, 'seek modes of image making that are colloquial' and give women 'the full right to the gaze' (King in Bonner et al. 1992 p137).

I decided that essentially my task was one of making a potential object into a secure subject and at this point I returned to the French feminists' writings on the relationship between women and their bodies: 'Write your self. Your body must be heard'.

Cixous affirms the equation of women with the body when she states 'women are body', and then she makes a further association between bodies and writing by saying, 'more body, hence, more writing'. Cixous maintains that by writing herself, woman will return to a body which has been 'more than confiscated from her, which has been turned into the uncanny stranger on display.....' (Cixous (1975) 1976 p880-887). She urges women to write from the immediate site of the body and sexuality, from the centrality of the pre-symbolic, pre-patriarchal' child-mother relationship. She joins Kristeva in suggesting that women need to return to this site of the semiotic, the pre-linguistic, to a language and writing which effectively subverts the symbolic and can be described as 'feminine', in Kristeva's terms 'the semiotic chora' (Kristeva (1974) 1984).²⁰

When Kristeva and other women associated with *écriture féminine* describe female writing as located and emerging from the female body, they are making a sustained effort to displace the idea of writing as based on a phallogentric tradition of writing and subject. Cixous and Irigaray pursue this partly through a particular definition of the female body. They agree with Butler on a definition that contains a plurality and multiplicity of sexual and

²⁰ See also 'Revisiting *Écriture Féminine*' p123.

libidinal impulses. Whilst recognising their arguments and position, I still questioned the suggested links between the body, language and psychic development. In common with Rachael Blau DuPlessis, I found myself asking, 'What body, then, is speaking? Does her body speak? Is it a body of words? Of cultural ideas? A body of language? A body of words inflected with its female body? DuPlessis continues with a list of possibilities, of influences on this body concluding, 'then what? From what is she writing?' and goes on to raise the gynaecological implications of a body-impelled definition of women's writing. '...does simply saying 'female writer' reduce her to gynaecology, when, by the same token, there is no way to take her as anything but a female body speaking words inflected by her being constructed female'. DuPlessis then demonstrates the unhelpfulness of any such Cartesian models,

Isn't isolating 'the body' conceptually still an unhelpful gesture from a long-criticized, though apparently inexhaustible, mind/body split that should immediately be declared moot? (DuPlessis, 1990 p170)

She is supported by some early critics of the notion of a women's language writing in 1977 in the journal *Questions féministes* edited by a collective including Simone de Beauvoir,

To advocate a 'woman's language' [...] seems to us [...] illusory [...] It is at times said that women's language is closer to the body, to sexual pleasure, to direct sensations and so on, which means that the body could express itself directly without special mediation and that, moreover, this closeness to the body and to nature would be subversive. In our opinion there is no such thing as a direct relation to the body. (In Marks and de Courtivron, 1981 p219)

DuPlessis seems to sum up the whole debate when she says, 'The body? I think the question occurred that way as a stage on a way to saying, 'socially and culturally embodied practices' (DuPlessis, 1990 p171).

I agreed with DuPlessis' conclusions and her position helped me to decide on a strategy that did take, as part of its rationale, the instability of the category 'woman' and the various manners of its discursive and social construction. I decided to invite my interviewees to move as well as speak.

Every woman who elected to deliver her response to camera was asked to bring with her a piece of music that she particularly enjoyed moving to. In giving my respondents the opportunity to move as well as speak, I was trying to open up the possibility of a challenge to the dangers inherent in representation, by attempting to address some aspects of the construction of femininity.

Mine was a relatively simple attempt to allow the women I interviewed some control over their image. I wanted to give them an opportunity to defy and transgress, to re-appropriate. And I hoped this would afford them some protection against an objectifying gaze.

I was also attempting to forge some link between speaking and pleasure. Attempting to affirm women's physical relationship with pleasure, with their own sexuality (jouissance) and linking this act of transgression with another –

that of speaking out publicly. Joan Retallack's notes on *jouissance* are useful here.²¹

In post-Lacanian psychoanalytic theory, *jouissance* is the literal *je ne sais quois* experience of pre-Oedipal sensual pleasures. It is thought to be lost to direct articulation since its source is pre-symbolic/linguistic. It is also widely identified with the feminine, though Kristeva stresses that it is/has been experienced by, and is therefore available to, both men and women.

Retallack also reminds us of the links Kristeva makes between poetry, *jouissance* and "revolutionary laughter", her identification of laughter *as* practice (Retallack in Keller and Miller (Eds.) 1994 pp371-376). She quotes Kristeva ((1974) 1984 p233) as saying, '(T)he text fulfils its ethical function only when it pluralizes, pulverizes, 'musicates' (truths), which is to say, on the condition that it develop them to the point of laughter'. There were many 'points of laughter' in the interviews and many of these are evidenced in the edited film.²²

With my invitation to move I was hoping to access another text²³ from the participants: a text over which they had control, one that originated from their own physical pleasure. In asking my respondents to bring music that **they** enjoyed moving to, I tried to ensure that they 'danced' not for the pleasure of others but for themselves. Through this invitation, I hoped to encode an

²¹ See also later in this section Emilyn Claid on the 'jouissance' dancing feminist subject pplxvii-lxviii.

²² DVD versions of this digital film in Appendix Two.

²³ I use the word 'text' here as it is often used in dramaturgical writings on theatre practice, where 'text' refers to the various elements of performance, the complex weave of written, spoken and physical material, plus scenographic concerns, for instance objects, lighting, performance environment.

assumption that this was possible by offering an opportunity to present a body, which Denise Riley describes as 'not always treated as sexed' (Riley, 2000 p51).

I was trying to recognise the problematic existence of women's bodies, whilst not censoring them. I was suggesting that here was a moment when pre-existing prejudices could be actively de-stabilized.

'The female body will speak its reality, its image, the censure it has been subjected to, its body filled to bursting.' (Brossard (1985) 1988 p73)

Writing about performing and watching dance, Emilyn Claid adds useful comment here. In *Yes? No! Maybe...* (2006) Claid discusses those strategies that seek to bring 'the real female body as subject to the performing stage to establish subjectivity'. She writes of the 'jouissance' dancing feminist subject that emerged in the 1970s: a performer who rejects fetishistic representation and does not, therefore, have access to strategies of seduction. Claid describes these dance artists as struggling to establish subjectivity in performance, as attempting to exist 'somehow *outside* traditional contexts of performer-spectator relations'. These dancers are searching for new relationships that negate 'identifications with narratives of desire'.

According to Claid this 'unmarked body' ²⁴an undisguised 'figure of internal jouissance' is owned and is the subject of its performance presence: 'A real identity, but invisible to the convention of the gaze'. She describes their lack of virtuosity and posturing in response to external conventions as leaving

²⁴ Claid acknowledges her debt to Phelan in her use of this term.

them enmeshed in a paradox, caught between subjectivity and invisibility (Claid, 2006 pp117-119).

This paradox has to be considered as part of any appraisal of the success of my attempts to achieve the 'simple' objectives described above. Did the 'opportunity' I offered raise questions, rather than present solutions. For instance is it possible to move in the 'real' way that might be suggested by this strategy? Does the presence of an interlocutor – myself in this case – militate against this possibility? Did I also represent a viewer or audience, requiring the woman in question to adopt a role, which could be described as 'performer'?

I was also engaged in filming their 'performance', an activity that could imply a wider, potentially cross-gendered audience. Does this condemn the attempt to more confirmed failure? Can anyone step outside prescribed and potentially limiting modes when moving under these circumstances? And are these problems only exacerbated when most of the women taking part chose to 'move' to a particular genre of music (usually that falling within the category of popular music)? Does this only promote an attempt at some acceptable, learned version of 'dancing'? And does this then constitute a 'performance' that is necessarily imbued with a desire for perfection? One that sets itself against externally constructed judgements of success and failure?

In the edited versions of the film, the moving women juxtapose/interrupt the static talking heads. I tried to find a dynamic relationship between the two 'texts', avoiding the possibilities of illustration in favour of the collision of

autonomous elements. The 'dancing' women are often smiling or laughing (sometimes out of embarrassment) but apart from this they are silent. If they speak, it is with their bodies and I wanted to have these two dialogues operate on each other.²⁵ I was interested in the different stories potentially revealed by each of these modes of 'speaking' and by a third story which is told between the two. I was concerned with levels and differences in articulacy. How a woman's overriding pre-occupation with her pregnant belly is told and then shown and how between these two accounts it is then 'known' differently, perhaps more fully. I edited each interview in such a way that towards its end the spoken text is abandoned in favour of the language of movement. Each woman dances out their last moments on film, giving movement the last word.

The Videoed Responses

These responses were recorded either in a studio at Dartington College of Arts, or in an empty room in my house. During the initial three interviews a female photographer assisted me. She undertook the filming and also trained me in the use of the equipment. The subsequent interviews I conducted alone. One sequence was recorded at the river Dart.²⁶

I set some simple rules for the interviews. Firstly I ensured that they were private for the duration of the filming. Apart from the first three interviews, I was the only other person present. I also decided to use a tripod

²⁵ See also section on editing pplxiii-lxxiv.

²⁶ See later commentary plxxi-lxxii.

for the spoken part of the response. This enabled me to set up the camera and then position myself just beside it. In this way, the women were not required to look into the camera's lens. They were able to see my face and make eye contact and were, therefore, able to respond directly to me.

I filmed a full headshot, which overfilled the screen and was top cropped. This type of shot takes the viewer close in to the speaker and promotes a sense of intimacy and direct communication. In the final film the interviewees spoke to the viewer as if that viewer represented the other participant in a close, quiet conversation.

I used black and white photography to minimize differences in location and dress, in order to produce a sequence of autonomous but visually linked moments. I wanted the audience to understand the simple rules of these encounters, in the hope that they could then quickly ignore these rules and focus their attention on what was being said and done.

At the beginning of the interview, after adjusting the camera height and focus, I gave each participant access to their screen image by turning the camera's small viewing screen towards them. The interviewee was then given the opportunity to re-position herself, or to request any adjustment or alteration to the filming set up. I also recorded a moment or two of speech and played it back so that each interviewee could hear her recorded voice. Each woman was advised that she could ask me to turn off the camera at any point and I also offered to erase material, although this was never requested. I made it clear

that there would be an opportunity to view the final edit of the film before it was shown in any public context and that any request that material should not be shown would be honoured.

At the beginning of the session, I asked each woman to give an account of her initial thoughts about the question. I then asked for her response now, after the two-week consideration period. Three dance practitioners were asked a further question about their relationship to dance and movement and some women were asked to expand on subjects which they had already raised.

Diving

Later if I emerge from my waters dripping all over with pleasures, if I go back the length of my banks, if from my shore I observe the revels of my dream-fish, I notice the innumerable figures they create in their dance; isn't the current of our women's waters sufficient to unleash the uncalculated writing of our wild and populous texts? Ourselves in writing like fish in the water, like meanings in our tongues, and the transformation in our unconscious lives. (Cixous, 1991 p58)

One woman was asked if she would be filmed diving into the river.

This respondent had used the same metaphor adopted by Cixous when describing Tchoukovskaia's writing. 'She (Tchoukovskaia)²⁷ says: "I am going to plunge." This plunge is her way of going to write' (Cixous, 1993 p14). My interviewee described her initial entry into writing in a similar way, continuing with descriptions of several other instances of 'secret swimming' enacted over the years.

²⁷ My brackets.

Then I thought, "Take the plunge". A smooth dive into the prose, cool waters surround me. Green weed and softly settled muddy bottom as my arms reach out, gliding along the lake bed [...] Keston Ponds shining with lily pads and dark mystery. Impulsively spontaneously I threw off all my clothes and ran and dived into the waters [...] When I was four, running along the edge of the open-air pool in Downham, South London, I ran right into the deep end. My hair floated up like pond weed and my dad, quick-thinking, grabbed it, wrapped his hand around it, *and pulled me out, pronto* [...] I have a favourite cold dip spot on the moors where the river drops into a pool from a height of six foot or so, and the plunge pool bubbles and thunders below an all-concealing oak tree [...] There was mist all around and I was still hot from my bed. In knickers and vest I sneaked out for an early morning dip. Icy waters. I kept my screams in the back of my throat, rattling in my head. The thrill of freezing water! Claire (written response)

I decided to use this image of plunging as a visual introduction to the filmed responses. The woman in question (Claire) was willing to re-visit a moment of diving into the local river for the camera. Cixous describes the writers that she loves as 'descenders, explorers of the lowest and deepest' and goes on to give examples of two ways of enacting this descent, ' – by plunging into the earth and going deep into the sea....' (Cixous, 1993 p5). My diver's descent and then her subsequent emergence from the water – her surfacing – provides an entry into the first interviewee's response.

All the rules I have described were designed to attempt to make the moment of filming as non-threatening, autonomous and undirected as possible, though again, I am not making claims here to the successful achievement of those aims.

Editing

'You see I tried to convey the idea of each part of a composition being as important as the whole[.....] After all to me one human being is as important as another human being, and you might say that the landscape has the same values, a blade of grass has the same value as a tree [...] I was not interested in making the people real but in the essence or, as a painter would call it, value.

(Stein in Haas (1946) 1971 pp15-16)

I edited the videos using a similar, simple approach and with three main rules in mind. Firstly, I tried to avoid misrepresenting what had been said, or the intention behind what had been said. In an attempt to avoid an 'invisible' editing which has the potential to manipulate the viewer's understanding, I decided to use a more evident method, chop-cutting sequences into each other and avoiding dissolves or fades whenever possible. Secondly, I juxtaposed moments of speaking and dancing in an attempt to release an additional view, or perspective on the interviewee. Thirdly, I included candid moments, particularly those when the participants were thinking, made mistakes or laughed. This third category of shot was an attempt to add more colour, humour and richness to the overall representation of each woman.

My role in the digital film-making process provided an opportunity to adopt a range of 'writing' perspectives. As the photographer, editor, dramaturge of these works, I had the opportunity to appropriate, re-appropriate, edit/disrupt and contextualise: to enter into negotiation with my interviewees in order to arrive at a plurality of viewpoints leading to the construction of a layered and divergent voice, an interplay of voices. This part

of the process came closest to what I described in my initial research proposal as a 'negotiated creativity'.²⁸

Dangers

As an artistic project this exercise raised serious questions about the validity or desirability of feminine art, which has as its preoccupation such a depiction of women's concerns. It is useful here to refer to Joan Retallack's essay ':re:thinking:literary:feminism: (three essays onto shaky grounds)'. Here Retallack queries the possible efficacy of an approach that attempts a democracy of voice or meaning. She does this by drawing our attention to the problems of an 'enlightenment' practice: one that concentrates on bringing about 'therapeutic exposures'. Retallack defines this practice as meaning to reveal, 'through startling disclosure (word-image "picturing" lived experience), *herstory*.' She goes on to describe such an activity as relegating the feminist novelist, poet and critic to a 'literary photographer and darkroom technician – to record our present experience and expose poorly or un(der)developed images from our long period of cultural latency'. As I have discussed earlier Retallack feels this emphasis can become a form of complicity, a participation in the history and tedious 'pressions' characteristic of women's lack of power (Retallack in Keller and Miller (Eds.) 1994 p348).

²⁸ I used this term in relation to an early working title for this research 'The/My Female Voice: a negotiated creativity'.

Under these terms, when extracted from the context of my wider investigation and regarded as a self-sufficient cultural product, my outcomes can be viewed as significantly flawed. However, I did not feel disempowered by a process that potentially relegated me to the 'literary photographer' of Retallack account. On the contrary, I was concerned to find the most responsible way to deal with my potential power as a self-appointed editor in relation to the digital film footage and the donated texts.

I also find it hard to see my contributors in this light. I recognize the anecdotal status of my next comments, but nevertheless I would like to observe that those invited seized the opportunity to speak with more alacrity and enthusiasm than I had anticipated. Without exception they seemed to find their role as contributor a satisfying process and most were proud of and interested in the edited outcomes. Responses to the showing of the digital films, both by contributors and those outside the process, have also been very positive. The edited films have been described as 'engaging', 'fascinating', 'compulsive viewing'.²⁹

However, I accept the suggestion made by both Retallack and Riley that any attempt at a democracy of voice or meaning is fraught with danger. I accept that these accounts have the potential to be used as evidence, confirming or illustrating certain prejudices or positions. I have made every attempt to refrain from drawing any of these conclusions from the donated material. I

²⁹ Feedback from the showing of Digital film *Talk Dancing at*, *Women Writing and Reading Conference*, University of Alberta, May, 2007.

have, instead, undertaken this project as part of a porous approach to genre, fiction, biography and autobiography. It is part of a methodology that operates through artistic practice: an approach in which the tension between intent, end product and my own artistic practice has to be acknowledged. It is an approach that preoccupies me and characterizes much of my work. It is also a methodology that I have pursued in various guises throughout this thesis.

I hope my commentary does justice to the generosity, wit and articulacy of the participants. With their help, this was not only an enjoyable process, but also an illuminating and clarifying one.

Responses to the Question

Here follows a selection of answers to the question *What is it You Wish to Speak Of?* All of the responses are featured in *italics* and the section also includes a brief commentary. Appendix Two supports the discursive commentary on this project contained in the section, *What is it You Wish to Speak Of?* As well as this transcription of selected videoed and written answers, it also contains two DVD copies of the film: one a full length 80 minute version and the other an edited version prepared for the Conference on Women Writing and Reading, Past and Present, Local and Global, that took place at Alberta University on 4-6th of May 2007. Appendix Two also contains a booklet of the written responses which accompanied the showing of the eighty minute film at tEXt Festival on 15th May, 2007.

I begin with the observation that some women were initially rather daunted by my question's openness:

I thought it was quite vast, potentially really vast.

(Jan, videoed response)

Bit overwhelmed really.

(Dot, videoed response)

These respondents described a process of elimination where they discarded one topic in favour of another. Some came to a final conclusion, others arrived at the video sessions still undecided:

I definitely didn't want to write because that felt too planned, and it could change from day to day, what I wanted to talk about.....and I still don't know so I decided to come with what I've got. (Dot, videoed response)

Of those women who made a choice, a number arrived with some form of text: a script, a poem, an account. These prepared texts were sometimes discarded and often superseded by another subject, which appeared at the last moment, or after the 'preamble' of the prepared account had been worked through.

Some women used the question to provoke a 'coming to terms with' or 'revisiting' of a core issue, something which eventually seemed too important, too central to their experience to avoid:

there were a lot of things that I thought I would like to talk about....but I think I've done a lot of talking about 'stuff' but I haven't really done much work.... I've done a lot of avoidance about being arthritic, which is a huge thing for me, so I thought I would talk about that today.

(Jan, videoed response)

Other women were surprised by their response to a moment when they were offered a listener, to the notion that someone might be interested in

what they had to say or write. Some described a sense of delight or high anticipation which accompanied the prospect of being allowed/able/invited/having the opportunity to speak and be heard:.

*...what an opportunity, to have a voice and be heard
....then I slipped back into my daily routine of coping, managing, dealing with daily life – the opportunity to speak lost....* (Nicolette, written response)

I was already working on something which was waiting to come out. It felt like a chance, an opportunity, there was something waiting to be asked.
(Sarah, videoed response)

A number were cautious about taking up, or allowing themselves to respond to such an invitation. However, when these anxieties and self doubts were put aside, my contributors had much that they wanted to say, or perhaps more significantly, that they wanted to be heard. Fluency and articulacy characterised their responses, even as they described their own inability to express themselves adequately or coherently. One woman spoke at length of a time when she had ceased to speak altogether and the dramatic consequences of this self-silencing.

I took a vow of silence recentlyI had this surge of anger and I responded to a friend who had acted destructively towards me – I responded with all my anger and I let it out and the effect immediately was that we didn't speak for a week (it happens to be a male friend I'm speaking about here) Since then the friendship has returned and there has been more respect – I feel more respected by him.
(Sarah, videoed response)

Two fluent respondents had an ambivalent relationship with their articulacy. They began their interviews in similar fashion:

Well there's a hundred and one things I can talk about, I can talk for ever about anything and then I decided to narrow it down to things that had really affected me, which is probably very self indulgent.

(Jo, videoed response)

My first thought was what wouldn't I want to talk about, as I rarely don't have anything to talk about.....recently I've been trying to quieten myself down....to quieten down both my verbal speaking and my internal speaking.

As part of my course I did a two hour non-stop rant where I was not allowed to repeat myself and people could come and listen to me...it was a sort of celebrated thing about me, that I could talk endlessly.

(Sally, videoed response)

This was consistent with other evidence presented by my interviewees, evidence which suggested levels of unease in relation to the prospect of becoming the subject of their own commentary.

The falseness of my persona telling its tale resounds in my own ears despite my best attempt at accuracy, and however plausible it may sound to its audience. What purports to be 'I' speaks back to me, and I can't quite believe what I hear it say. My uncertainty isn't so much with lying to others, which I'd know about, as it is with lying to myself, which I wouldn't.

(Riley,2000, p61)

The respondent Jo, mentioned above, ended her interview in some confusion and seeking re-assurance for her eloquence:

I'm sorry I went on didn't I? Such an emotional thing just talking about....Oh God did I go on too long? I just rabbited and rabbited.....did I talk for too long? I just couldn't.....Oh God.....no it didn't feel too much, it feels.....whoof!

Note here too her derogatory use of the word 'rabbit' to describe her own articulacy. In this way there was evidence of some women conforming to Kaplan's observation about the subject of women's writing often reflecting an anxiety surrounding their place as the subject of their own texts, '...to be a woman and a poet presents many women with such a profound split between

their social, sexual identity (their 'human' identity) and their artistic practice that the split becomes the insistent subject, sometimes overt, often hidden or displaced, of much women's poetry.' (Kaplan, 2002, p55). Joan Retallack (1997) also sees this as problematic and goes further to say that even when this emphasis on the subjective has a subversive function, it still condemns female writers to 'lurk in the subjective (private) subterranean subaltern world of subversive self-definition.' (Retallack, 1997, p355). One woman, a poet, who responded to my question with a poem, did seem to feel that some explanation was necessary:

I started wanting to talk about my father who died about six weeks ago and I thought a lot about that and started writing a piece....well a set of pieces and then about half way through I thought I don't want to write about this because it's too personal, too intimate.....it was as if I was generating raw material to start with and I was going to come and read a kind of history of what went on and how I was dealing with it, what was said at the funeral, the background to it and stuff like that and how I came to a point where I was happy with what was going on and what I stood up and spoke at the funeral – I'd spent a lot of time thinking about it such that I was happy with saying it, because there was so much sub-text going on and then I thought well, I want to have gone beyond that because I have gone beyond that in a way, that's how I dealt with it as a person and this is how I deal with it as a poet. So this is my moving beyond that into poetic form. (Hilary, videoed response)

This uneasiness with the 'I' was often visible in the presentation of the previously described 'prepared material'. This material was often generalised, abstract, depersonalised. Most of the women, however, managed finally to overcome these difficulties and inhabit their own testimony.

Then I started thinking about pageants and beauty competitions where they parade up and down in their swimming costumes and then they are asked a question about what they wish. And so if I said that I wished for world peace would I sound like I was in a beauty pageant? [...] and then I remembered when I was a kid I used to wish to play every musical instrument in the world.

(Cat, videoed response)

One woman, who steadfastly avoided this option, eventually came to a point of frustration where she violently cursed what she described as 'voice jails', those impersonal systems for redirecting your calls to large public utilities and companies.

The whole process of constructing the initial question raised issues about my use of terminology, including the use of the category 'woman'.

In retrospect I understand that I may have prejudiced responses by my use of the term 'women' on my question sheet.

I am collecting material for my research.
This involves asking **women** to contribute text or speak
in answer to the following question

Denise Riley describes the term 'women' as 'both synchronically and diachronically erratic as a collectivity'. She also states that 'for the individual 'being a woman' is also inconstant, and can't provide an ontological foundation.' She does, however, admit 'the stubborn harshness of lived gender' (Riley, 1988, p2-3), which runs alongside this questioning of sexual categorisation, but qualifies this admission by saying that 'any attention to the life of a woman, if traced out carefully, must admit the degree to which the effects of lived gender are at least sometimes unpredictable, and fleeting.' (Riley, 1988, p6). Perhaps these women's prior knowledge of my interests and activities also influenced their responses. Nevertheless, it was noticeable that several of the participants responded by speaking of aspects of their experience,

which they themselves placed within the category and experience of 'being a woman', even though one respondent opened her account with a diatribe against what she seemed to feel was an imposed imperative:

Oh fuck, I'm not going to bloody talk about women again. Why do women.....are we always having to.....having to talk about ourselves all the bloody time instead of being able to get on and do what you feel like doing.
(Tessa, videoed response)

She then fully embraced this imperative, speaking eloquently, and in some detail, about her experience as a menopausal woman:

*So all this hormone stuff I'm going through....
So all the hormones that gave you all the woman stuff you needed to bring up children, the patience and the mother love....gradually they are drifting away and instead of thinking, Oh my god, what am I now? I'm not a woman anymore, you're thinking, God, this is interesting, I'm still a woman but.....I'll never stop being a woman, but I can feel that I am able to do all these things, I've not been able to do for thirty years, that I've put on the back burner because the hormones have been there, and you've welcomed that, you wanted it, but at this stage they're going and it's fucking brilliant. You can do what you want to do and be what you want to be and you're feeling all this positiveness and this assertiveness and then....then people get scared and they run away.*
(Tessa, videoed response)

Tessa then went on to move from her personal observations to make some general observations about women's ascribed roles ending with a fluent attack on the many restrictions she feels are inherent in these requirements of women as mothers and carers:

The first thing that came to mind was anger I'd got at the restrictions of being female. Of being at an age when finally my periods have stopped and my whole body is changing for the first time since I was fourteen I guess and seeing that as a really dynamic and interesting thing, but being angry at the responses I've got that are trying once again to limit you to confine you to roles.

*Why can't I grow up to be a fireman?
Why do I have to be nice?*

Why do I have to be understanding?
Why do I have to be patient?
Why do I have to put myself at the end of a long list of other people?
Why do I have to be made to feel guilty if I consider myself, my needs my wants, my desires, my lusts?
Why do I have to accept a lack of independence?
Why do I have to accept less than what I need, less than what I want?
Why am I not allowed to feel passion?
Why am I not allowed to love my own body?
Why can't I get up and be forthright and demanding without being accused of being a terrible, terrible woman?
Why can't I act out what I feel?
Why can't I act out what I need, what I want to do?
Why must age, shape, facial expression, size, way of moving, way of speaking define me?
Why must they be used against me?
Because I'm a woman. (Tessa, videoed response)

At the end of these questions, the respondent then explained why, despite her initial railing against a sense of obligation, she acknowledged her responsibility to a group with whom she identifies and to whom she feels some responsibility:

It still all comes back to knowing what you felt, what you wanted, what your deepest passions and everything were and still feeling angry that they were judged, even though you don't give a shit, you don't care what people think, you care for everybody, for all women, you care because you're a woman and you don't want to see women confined and limited. (Tessa, videoed response)

Other women spoke about their experience of being single parents in a rural environment:

One thing that had a profound effect on me was rearing children – alone – crime against society, well humanity really – rearing these children and relying on the state in part..... the woman who lives on her own fornicates with the devil – rural England hasn't really changed a great deal. (Jo, videoed response)

When I first moved in there I had lots of complaints about me because I was a single parent. I had the police the council, social security up my house saying this this and this...
(Dot, videoed response)

Housebound:

I would like to speak about being stuck in the house, because I've spent a lot of time being stuck in lots of houses, which haven't meant anything to me and when I didn't want to be there [....] You're in the house and you look out of the window and think, 'I wish I could be somewhere else.' – you dream about all the other places you could be and I've been to some of those places and when I was there I kept thinking, 'I wish I could be in the house, because then I could relax.' – but I never am relaxed in the house.

It's a bit metaphorical – because being stuck in the house stands for something – the way I tidy the house is the way I try and tidy my head up – put it into lists and shelves and compartmentalize it and then I wish it was much more chaotic and free.
(Paula, videoed response)

Wives/carers:

If a man only wants from you what he wanted from his mother, then he's either got to go, or change.
(Tessa, videoed response)

Pregnant:

I'm finding it really difficult to work when all I want to do is think about my pregnancy, that's the most important thing to me at the moment and that surprises me because four weeks ago I don't think I would have said that, despite the fact that I was already pregnant. But now nothing in the world is anywhere near as interesting to me as my belly..... I can see it (body) as a shape rather than a thought, sort of eggy.
(Sally, videoed response)

This woman seemed to be confirming Cixous' assertion that a pregnant woman takes on intrinsic value as a woman in her own eyes and, undeniably acquires body and sex. My respondent went on to confirm her changing relationship with her body:

I have quite a thing about primates and I feel primate like myself and I feel quite fierce about that.
(Sally, videoed response)

She continued by referring specifically to her body hair, which she had decided not to remove....

That's it now, I'm not going to do that again. I've never been obsessed about getting rid of hair on my body, but particularly now, I really don't want to and I'm sweating more, and I'm a bit uncomfortable about that, but actually I'm enjoying seeing what happens in that way – I feel I'm allowed to.

(Sally, videoed response)

Women referred to their age and the impact that had on their roles as daughters and mothers:

.....I am 59, I've struggled for most of my adult life with my mother's unhappiness and what I felt to be her need to be supported emotionally by me. Also her unkindness when she wasn't rewarded – her power over me – my inability to see clearly and free myself emotionally.

(Nicolette, written response)

50 isn't old and neither is 60, but 64 is getting dangerously close to 70 and I have learned that the whole business of aging speeds up. People I know keep dying and I've become very aware of my own mortality, so the over-riding impulse for me now is carpe diem. Whatever it is, I must do it now while I still can. There is some regret in this. A whole list of things is not now possible, either physically or because they are no longer appropriate. I shall never learn to ski, or even skate. I'll never wear a miniskirt again and I'll never again look good in a swimsuit. I'll probably never fall in love again and probably never again go to bed with a man. I am not now going to make a mark on the world except through my children. Coming to terms with these 'losses' is painful, but more so I suspect, if the list had been longer.

(Janet written response)

For some reason, lately, I have come across women with pre-school children who are having a hard time. This is not a group of women I have met for a while. My peer group are mothers with teenage sons. It has made me relive some of my worst times and also made me sad that things are if anything more complex in the post-feminist modern age for women who choose to have children. In an age of relative prosperity where young people have been brought up to be assertive and self-determining, girls are in many ways in control of their lives more than when I was before getting married. Yet the balance of power changes drastically when children come along just as it always did.

(Ellen, written response)

Some referred to their experience as employees or participants in male

dominated professions or activities:

It was easy for my brother because he was a boy – he could dance with the male side, but around where I was there were no women dancing at all, so when I was about thirteen my dad invented a Morris tradition – he reconstructed a tradition based on notes and what dancing had been like according to dancing around the area. And a women's team was set up in Bloxham, the village next door, which I danced with.

(Cat, videoed response)

Several described moments of transgression within these categories, sometimes identifying a particular viewpoint on their transgressive action/s.

A lot of it was the man next door – his wife was having an affair, she was betraying him and he knew it was going on but he didn't deal with it....and I feel....in retrospect all that rage and pain and venom was directed towards me. It was an extraordinary time, a time of absolute persecution and this is not 100 years ago, this is 25 years ago.

(Jo, videoed response)

My respondent then listed the acts of petty persecution, which she suffered, describing them quite dispassionately until she came to the accusations, which specify that she neglected her children. At this point my interviewee became momentarily tearful. Another woman described her persecution on a council estate where she was the only single parent, in the end she admitted reluctantly:

If there had been a man there, I don't think I would have had that and that really pissed me off and it's like I'm a threat to somebody and I felt I was a threat... I think I was a threat to another woman and I thought, shit, this is really sad.

(Dot, videoed response)

Many of my respondents touched on the area of self-image. One woman began by speaking generally on the subject:

Image, what this image tells you about me. I am fascinated by image, by what we wear, the outside clothing which is only about one third of who we

really are....we just look at the surface and not any deeper than that.....how people are guided by fashion and the media who holds the power.

(Dot, videoed response)

When I asked her to expand, to perhaps give a specific example she began to speak more personally:

I suppose I ought to start with me, with my image. I'm just beginning to realise, through growing up, or maturing or psychotherapy, but I used to...I was not obsessed, but I used to think look at this big stomach and I've got this big bum and I used to think this is not what I want to be, but I don't want to be skinny either and I thought I'd like to just take that bit in and that bit in and be able to wear clothes that I wanna wear. Now and it's brilliant, it's so brilliant, I'm so chuffed with myself that I'm actually beginning to realise that actually I'm not so big and so what if I am and I'm, actually beginning to like my body for the first time in ages and I'm thinking, I'm going to wear this and if that's there, so be it, I'm nearly 50 and I've had a child and this is just....you know.....it doesn't matter and that's taken a long time to come to that point and say it doesn't matter....that's been a biggy....yeah.

Insecurity, self doubt, lack of self confidence, self esteem, all those issues aboutabout belonging...yeah. definitely all those things about...yeah...being accepted....about having a big stomach and actually what I was doing was denying Nat, in a way, denying my child and my age and who I am as a woman, I think I was denying a hell of a lot, not accepting who I am and I think I'm beginning to accept who I am and if people don't like this piece of flab then...well....tough shit basically.

(Dot, videoed response)

.... It (Contact Improvisation) doesn't always work and it can also, very rarely, but sometimes cause great trauma as especially women have a lot of issues around what they look like and being touched and levels of abuse, which does happen for men and boys but it seems to be a stronger voice from women articulating.

(Caroline, videoed response)

The interviewee above was a professional dancer and teacher who works internationally in the field of Contact Improvisation. Her description and discussion of her process and her relationship with it, contribute very usefully to this whole question of self-image and provide some confirmation of my intuitive attempts to avoid compromising women who chose to be

filmed by inviting them to move to music of their choice.

Initially Caroline talked in general terms:

It's Ok to say I like dancing because I enjoy feeling my body move – and actually it can be that simple and it is that simple, but often we put a lot of problems in the way.

When you are dancing, especially if you are dancing to music, there is a sense in which you are taken away from the everyday and that can help you, it can cheer you up, and make you feel good because you suddenly go to another space where its not about you or everyday life, it's about the moving and the music or whatever and it's a little bit of a moment away from time – a space for something else to move you, to get past that conscious mind. Movement is a way of expressing what is happening rather than what should happen.

She also spoke on a more personal level.

Through most of my life, being almost six foot, I was, from a very early age, told I couldn't do ballet because I didn't fit into the classic mode. Now, especially through contemporary dance, you can have different shapes and sizes on stage, but it's still limited and in terms of working with improvisation, it's been a great freedom and a great joy to go into a different situation and just free people up to move their body and not worry about how it looks or how it's supposed to be in terms of society's frame. It's been a great tool for personal development in terms of self-awareness.

When I'm working on material for a performance there's a trigger, when I'm working physically, that allows me to move deeper into the material, when I'm just not focussing on words and it suddenly happens where I'll be thinking about my idea or a situation, but when I actually start moving it can somehow get through the judgemental mind and physically find a different place to arrive with an idea and when that actually happens, when it takes over you physically, it's a very extraordinary feeling and it's like the idea moves you somehow and with the physical process there comes this point when you are not sure if you are moving your body or if it is moving you, but for me that is one of the moments of biggest inspiration.

She was able to articulate her problems with current attitudes to the body and sexuality as expressed through popular dance....

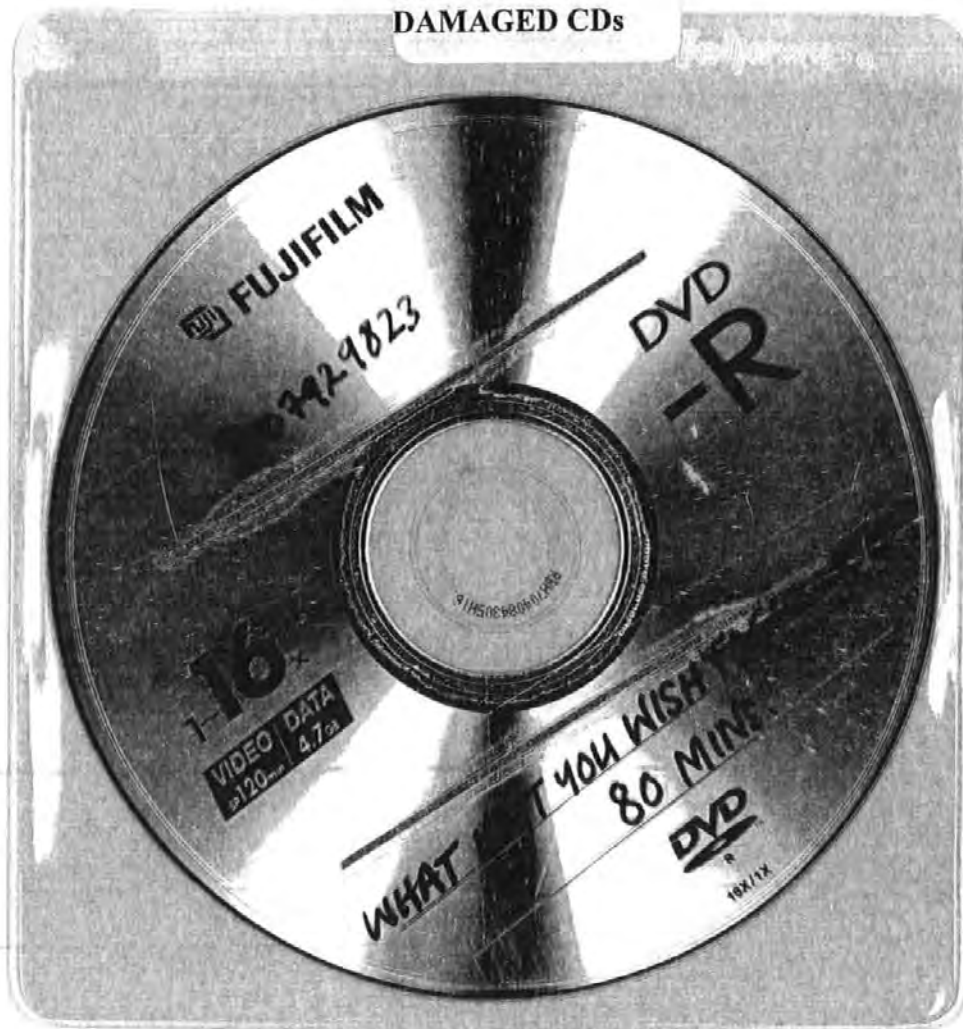
I can't handle this pop, shimmy shammering, g.string, butt shaking option, it seems to be our only way of dancing and moving around each other socially.

WHAT IS IT YOU WISH TO SPEAK OF?

digital film, black and white, length: approximately 80 minutes

This version of the digital film does not feature a title or credits as it was designed to be shown as a repeating loop in a gallery at the text festival. The showing was accompanied by a poster and booklets containing an edited selection of written contributions, (see following pages).

**CAUTION –
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liable to prosecution

....which contrasted with her belief that:

Somehow through the body we can relate to each other on a more fulfilling level. Through moving together we find some language between the cultural differences somehow, a way of communicating.

She was in sympathy with my decision to ask women to move rather than dance. Speaking from her own experience she explained,

What I hate about dancing is that people call me a dancer and then ask me to dance – because I've got no training, I just move around.

Concluding this selection of answers to my question, I would again wish to thank the contributors for their generous, often witty and always honest responses. Their answers provided me with invaluable questions and their collaboration and continued interest have supported me throughout this project.

Text featured on poster accompanying showing:

What is it you wish to speak of?

Please consider the above question for two weeks.

At the end of this period either write your response,
record it on to audiotape, or I can video your response.

If you decide to be filmed then please come with a CD
or tape of a piece of music that you particularly enjoy 'moving to'.

On film are:

(in order of appearance)

MISRI DEY	Four Million Women
DOT SPINK	Psychological Knives
PAULA CRUTCHLOW	Stuck in the House
MELANIE THOMPSON	A Molecular Sense of Speed
JO PREWER	Bloody Good Job
CLAIRE MORLEY	Take the Plunge
HILARY MENOS	Journey
RUTH NOVACZEK	Unspeakable
JANET HUTCHENSON	Independent Ladies
CAT RADFORD	Get Outside
SUE PALMER	Voice Jails
JENNI WITTMAN	A Very Deep Place
TESSA BLIGHT	Why?
SALLY WATKINS	Eggy
ROS LANGDON	Inner Truth
SARAH FRANCES	Darker Feelings
JAN POVEY	Chair Dancing
CAROLINE WATERS	Frees Your Mind

prate chatter clack blather gossip gab harp blurt
gabble spout tattle blab yap bleat yammer yatter
rap jabber carp witter nag bitch rant scold prate nag
clack blather gossip gab harp blurt prate

what is it you wish to speak of?

Please consider the above question for two weeks.
At the end of this period either
write your response, record it onto audiotape,
or I can video your response.

witter bitch rant scold prate chatter
gossip gab harp blurt prate gabble sp
yap bleat yammer yatter yak rap jabber carp nag
bitch rant scold prate chatter clack blather gossip
harp blurt prate gabble gab tattle blab yap bleat
yammer yatter yak jabber carp witter blurt bitch
rant scold prate chatter clack blather gossip gab harp
blurt prate gabble spout tattle blab yap bleat yammer
yatter yak rap jabber carp witter nag bitch rant tattle

You don't seek to master.
To demonstrate explain,
grasp. And then to lock
away in a strongbox.
To pocket a part of the
riches of the world.
But rather to transmit:
to make things loved
by making them known.
You in your turn,
want to affect, you want
to wake the dead,
you want to remind people
that they once wept for love,
and trembled with desires,
and that they were then
very close to the life that
they claim they've been
seeking while constantly
moving further away ever since.

Helene Cixous – Coming to Writing

I listen to and repeat what women tell me at night.
One part of the text comes from me.
One part is torn from the body of the peoples;
one part is anonymous, one part is my brother.
Each part is a whole that I desire, a greater life that I envy
and admire, that adds its blood to my own blood.
In me there is always someone who is greater than I,
someone nobler, someone more powerful,
who pushes me to grow, whom I love,
whom I don't seek to equal, a body, a soul, a text -- human,
whom I don't want to restrain,
whom I want to let circulate freely,
to whom I relish having to give the infinite.
Helene Cixous isn't me but those who are sung in my text,
because their lives, their pains their force, demand that it resound.

Helene Cixous - Coming to Writing

.....what an opportunity, to have a voice and be heard!

.....then I slipped back into my daily routine of coping, managing, dealing with daily life – the opportunity to speak lost.....

Nicolette Broadbent

..... I thought, "Take the plunge". A smooth dive into the prose, cool waters surround me. Green weed and softly settled muddy bottom as my arms reach out, gliding along the lake bed.....

Claire Morley

.....I am 59, I've struggled for most of my adult life with my mothers unhappiness and what I felt to be her need to be supported emotionally by me. Also her unkindness when she wasn't rewarded – her power over me – my inability to see clearly and free myself emotionally.

Nicolette Broadbent

50 isn't old and neither is 60, but 64 is getting dangerously close to 70 and I have learned that the whole business of aging speeds up. People I know keep dying and I've become very aware of my own mortality, so the over-riding impulse for me now is *carpe diem*. Whatever it is, I must do it now while I still can.

There is some regret in this. A whole list of things is not now possible, either physically or because they are no longer appropriate. I shall never learn to ski, or even skate. I'll never wear a miniskirt again and I'll never again look good in a swimsuit. I'll probably never fall in love again and probably never again go to bed with a man. I am not now going to make a mark on the world except through my children. Coming to terms with these losses is painful, but more so I suspect, if the list had been longer.

Janet Hutchenson

not 999, 000
not 2,358,789
not twice that again

but

5, 000, 000.

10 million eyeballs
45 million fingers
5 millions thumbs
5 million livers
10 million kidneys

millions of pubic hair
572 billion hair follicles

500, 000, 000 ideas
10 millions forearms
5 million napes of necks.
5 million red mouths no longer
crooning

Misrl Dey

WHAT IS IT YOU WISH TO SPEAK OF?

What is it you *WISH* to speak of?

The word *WISH* was chosen in preference to *WANT*, as it contained within it the question of desire.

In the beginning, I desired.

"What is it she wants?"

"To live. Just to live. And to hear myself say the name."

"Horrors! Cut out her tongue!"

Helene Cixous – Coming to Writing

What is it you wish to *SPEAK* of?

The word *SPEAK* was chosen in preference to *SAY*, as it contained within it questions of unspeakability and the shift from private to public. It was chosen for its association with phrases such as *to speak out (of place)* and *to speak up (for one's self, or in public)*.

G U I L T

speaking - speaking out - like nagging? can men nag?
does to speak out imply against someone or something?
does it conjure a culpable person, a blameworthy act?

What is it you wish to speak *OF*?

OF was chosen in preference to *ABOUT*, because it suggested the discursive rather than the descriptive.

"Writing not as personality, writing as praxis."

Rachel Blau DuPlessis
The Pink Guitar - Artifice and Indeterminacy

ruth novaczek 20/5/02 6.14 pm -0400.speak

hi barbara,
i was talking about you with melanie the other night and we
almost invited you over..but got kind of waylaid...well ive
written a very freeflow thing over a couple of weeks and
this is it... this is what i wish to speak of....
id be happy for you to ruthlessly chop it, its not well
edited and i dont care what you do with it....let me know your
thoughts..
if you want to go for a drink anytime...my number:
best
ruth

day one, of fourteen.....an odyssey...

of what do i wish to speak?
i wish to speak...yet i cannot, for years i have swallowed
words with beer and with red wine, why? because i am
afraid...some of the voices i swallowed emerges....in bars as,
shocked, (i say shocked but, rendered speechless, may be
more accurate. i observe, (i say observe, in fact i sate) at
couples, that is, man, woman, both looking at the brickwork,
or is it the air between them, she pours tea, eyes averted
as she serves, pours the most modest of
beverage into cup. others arrive in red saloons he fat, she
not so, with flickering expressions. i am lost, my
diversion goes unrecorded, i fear the consequences.

day two (not really but lets say it is)
war of course is a word that pushes at the throat, forcing
some cry that melts to words, some ridiculous impossibility,
connected somehow to the maroon saloon and the dead eyed
couple with tea, this is peace and i am lost.

3.
there is an absence of sex, it is this which pushes at my
voice, damped down by beer and solitude.

4 (a sunny day)

I want to talk about the book, the Da Vinci Code coz it's a bestseller, coz it
is about the Holy Grail, the Holy Grail, Le Prieur de Sion and conspiracy
and intrigue and people dying and priests flying.

But there is one fact in that book that

JUMPED OUT AT ME

LEAPT OUT AT ME

One small fact that I had forgotten I had forgotten
For a while.

5 million women were burnt in the Crusades
crooning.
Burnt as witches, coz

they knew too much they knew.

They bore witness
They bore children
They bore Jesus Christ and his many offspring.

5 million women.

How many hundreds of thousands died in the Tsunami?
The world's 'greatest natural disaster'.
How many people died in the World Trade Centre?
Ho many people died in Kosovo?
Multiply that by 10
10 Tsunamis - man made - of human kind born.

Because they could do things

They
Could
Do
Things

5 million women
5 million

not 10
not 100
not 576
not 5,432
not 64,321
not 640,438

For some reason, lately, I have come across women with pre-school children who are having a hard time. This is not a group of women I have met for a while. My peer group are mothers with teenage sons. I has made me relive some of my worst times and also made me sad that things are if anything more complex in the post-feminist modern age for women who choose to have children. In an age of relative prosperity where young people have been brought up to be assertive and self-determining, girls are in many ways in control of their lives more than when I was before getting married. Yet the balance of power changes drastically when children come along just as it always did.

Ellen Rugen

In all the years
that I have been afraid of this
my fear indistinct and unfathomable
so even more remarkable than that
in all the years
that I have been afraid of this
I never guess how
joyful it might be
how natural and how
necessary this fury flower
opening out inside my heart
to set me free

today I am calm
like an animal peacefully
asleep in the sun
in the habitat in
which I belong because
I know my power now

I never imagined
I would ever feel this again
I thought I had to leave it behind
in the long grass of
my childhood garden

Sarah Frances

then there is nothing to say...walking maybe on a beach, a workingclass resort with donuts and chips and a lot of jeans ambling along....edge to the sea...

5. a day without substance
the wine is old and tastes like a wet dog...it is spring... and i wish to speak of rock stardom and the creation of sexual personae....too many cigarettes, sucking on an absence of sex....

6
this is a time of great tragedy....we are masked and cemented into our faces....a survival thing, manipulated as we are....we are mourning in the strangest way....we are not momentous , now i know what is meant by the banality of evil.

7.
i am not a natural recluse. amen.

day 8 (later, stoned, drunk angry)
you absolutely cannot make sushi in a bad mood.. you need judgement to buy the fish in the first place...then a kind of blissful calm to do the rest..twice i made sushi in a bad mood and regretted it.

9.
you dont want to know...this is unspeakable...well its something that does get spoken of these days but there is nevertheless humiliation and shame in the telling, regardless of liberation idealists, spill the beans, lay it on the table, feel better, no not in this case. humiliation is humiliation after all....and abuse is abuse, and theres all the horrible byways of masochism to think about, and patterns and responsibility, so in the end show and tell is not an abuse pastime...well it is, then it isnt...then of course the word abuse is so crass and says so little. then again its very good on a civil liberties level. i imagine there are thousands of abuses going on every day all over the world, some major and obvious, some just lurking in corners and appearing now and again to devastate.

10. yawn

11. intense dark night of the soul.....tonight i snogged a rose, i walked past it and its scent made me turn back and as i lean towards it to inhale the fragrance, the wind blew and we were kissing.....later i passed a dripping lime tree, it swooped down and we were locked in an embrace.....im probably going mad.....here in the rolling green, and me a citys archive, buzzing with all kinds of whatever.....nature drives me wild, and my personal life is a wreck being raised from the depth.....when in rome...im becoming a jewish anorak (know warra mean)

12. probably not if the audience at the cinema was anything to go by....

13. my lucky number

14. the terrible teens; me at home, in room, with hastily cooked dinner on knee, record player on floor on with one single playing over and over, lets say its the 4 tops standing in the shadows of love,....god knows what that meant to me then, anyway, or it couldhave been dear prudence, or bungalow bill, or even sexie sadie,....well....i was in all sorts of weird things at that time....wanked at by the swimming teacher, seduced by the babysitter.....flashers in alleys, its hard being a 14 year old girl....it took at least 15 years after that to process it all and fall in love and that was even worse....and im still not in any place thats that much better, dont wanna be a bridget jones or anything but leftover chicken and rice, a raw tomato and a kiwi fruit, a beer, two glasses of horrible wine (from a recent part, cheapskate guest!), some water (sparkling) and some cognac (camus) with aforesaid water....the cognac by the way was bought coming back from new york, the trip was romantic but somehow lacking, the cognac a symbol, and also a reality.

that is 2 weeks in the life of the unspeakable.
(but expressed somehow)

For Barbara

It is hard to describe what I mean, but a connection between grief and transparency increasingly preoccupies me. From early adolescence I had the sensation of being almost invisible like a ghost sliding around with no discernable imprint, haunting my own life. That feeling lasted for many years and fed the fantasy of a series of parallel lives. But recently something different has been happening, and I find myself disturbingly present in my life. Here is just the beginning of trying to explain what I mean.

My mother-in-law (who I liked very much) wore a turquoise ring on her right hand. Not a great one for jewellery or show, she wore it most of the time, and when I imagine her, the ring is there. She was also identified by a secondary regular adornment, a silver necklet, made of quite heavy circular links. When I see it occasionally, around the neck of my eldest daughter, I am sharply confronted by the fact that the original owner has disappeared. I can see right through her, from the distance and into the future.

My sister (who was younger than me) killed herself one day, in her top floor flat, overlooking the sea. I saw her a month or so before this event, but never afterwards. Policemen, imposing their sense of civic duty on our lives, took that away. Discovered by a window cleaner, working away on the upper floor of a seafront mansion, she had somehow vanished. I searched for her for years, climbing ladders up impossible facades, labouring with buckets of water. But I never found her. She had managed to escape, leaving me by myself to watch the horizon.

The turquoise ring was passed to me from the sons of my mother-in-law, and then stolen easily from my bedroom by the child of a friend. Bright and almost gaudy, it had just been repaired, and was of no significant value according to the jeweller.

My sisters body was cut open and plundered for explanations. Huge stashes of prescribed drugs were found; but there was no trace of the ring. I never saw it again. Hardly a day passes without me thinking about my sister or the ring. But if pressed, I would find it difficult to prove that either had ever existed. I need them to re-emerge, so that I can slide back into my haunting. Tomorrow, tomorrow I will search through the photographs.....

Maggie Giraud,13/5/02 12:59 pm - 0400, The question

Hello

I havent forgotten, and have given the question a lot of thought, and have come up against a curious duality in my reply. It wont go away, Ive tried very hard!

Love MM

Barbara Bridger,Fri, 11 Feb 2005 16:55:10 +0000

On Monday May 13th 2002 you wrote in response to the question WHAT IS IT YOU WISH TO SPEAK OF? I have come up against a curious duality in my reply - I can only reply I wish to speak of two apparently unconnected, but inseparable things and I suspect this has always been the case throughout my life. On the one hand, I wish to speak of grief and find myself absolutely mute, and upon the other hand I find myself endlessly questioning and confronting transparency.

Fascinating eh? Care to elaborate?

Love BB

Maggie Giraud, Thur,21 Apr 2005 04:33:04 EDT

Hello Barbara

Well I made a start and it is attached. Of course it is intended to be spoken or delivered hesitantly, rather than read.

Printed for Barbara Bridger<b.bridger@dartington.ac.uk>

Alex Fisher,16/4/02 6: 12 am+0100,Re: Speaking of...

I wish to speak of love, of hope, of dreams and desires. I wish to speak of vision, of worlds where people live their lives in love, not fear. I wish to speak of desires, unrequited and broken hearts, of dreams, lost.. like ships at sea, never coming back to land. I wish to speak of frustration and indecision, of now knowing and banging of heads against walls to make an answer come, an answer, any answer, even if the answer is the end, of it all. I wish to speak of hopelessness, lethargy, of giving up, of finding it all too hard, of staying in bed all day, all year, all life and hoping it will all just go away, but wanting it all to come, and rescue you. I wish to speak of magic wands, waving, of spells and charms and incantations... miracles and the surprises I have forgotten. I wish to speak of dampness and moist places, the power of longing, the velvet soft fur silk of life that wishes to flow, like a river, down my inner thigh. I wish to speak of slicing, the pain, from my body, cutting it out, as if I can. I can. The contorted writing of...of not knowing what I should do...what should I do? How do I do? I wish to speak of confusion and contradiction, of tearing of hair and banging of heads against wall to make an answer come, any answer

Printed for Barbara Bridger <b.bridger@dartington.ac.uk>

WHAT IS IT YOU WISH TO SPEAK OF?

Deep blue across the shoulders. Midnight is coming.
Now a chill.
A breeze disturbs these gags and vells and witty net curtains.
Giddiness
as that question opens into the other question:

How would I know?

Except by disturbance. A greying over.
Fainting away from cackle.

AND HOW WOULD I KNOW IT WAS MY KNOWING?

What else's knowing lodges in my will
and desire, prompting, fooling,
disguising – tightening the gags,
thickening the vells, fluttering the
nets? Making me wholly white, 21st
century, not a refugee, a buyer of
crisps and milk, obsessive, clocked,
working, carpeted, unanswerable.

Whose knowing am I spokesperson for?

Is me a mistaken identity?

What moves in me (so stealthy)
that I am bound
in compliances I cannot apprehend
except through near-death processes
of backward disappearance?

As if in coming to earth I was
fitted with a lifesbagworth of saying.
And when it is empty I die.

And how would I know?

Why would I let that happen?

Is there a moment of giving up?
What for?

**Christine Duff, 8/5/02 5:21pm+00100,
What is it you wish to speak of?**

I wish to speak of my experiences I wish to
speak of how we can succeed in a society
which is still based upon patriarchal values
I wish to speak of what success means I wish
to speak of how life can be wonderful with-
out being centred around a man, whatever
your sexuality I wish to speak of the
importance of my friends I wish to speak of
the importance of friends I wish to speak of
the wonder of difference I wish to speak of
the power of laughter I wish to speak of the
importance of passion I wish to speak of the
meaning of home I wish to speak of freedom
from I wish to speak of power to I wish to
speak of simplicity and complexity I wish to
speak of listening I wish to speak today...
and tomorrow

Journey

Six weeks on a cargo boat has cracked my lips
and turned my hair to string. My eyes are glazed
with salt and the suns glare, and the deck burns.

They feed me, but not much, and not well:
the daily orange has rind like a leather ball.
From wake-up call to lights out its all.

mess and order, order and mess. I play hopscotch
with the child, and cards with the men. They
treat me like one of them, sometimes, and sometimes

Im not there. When we docked the land became sea,
with pitch and roll, and strange trees tilt.
Words confused me at first so, for want of a name,

I call this home. The natives find me strange.
Small crabs split their sideways grins at me,
and the monkeys screech. I have built a hut

with bamboo poles and broad banana leaves.
When it rains, fresh water drips from the roof
to a cup made from plaited grass. Brocade butterflies

settle on the dust floor. They draw pictures
in the sand. Another boat is coming. I think they
want me to stay, sometimes, and sometimes I think I will.

Hilary Menos

Can it be revoked?

Is this tosh?

Why should speaking be any use at all?

Why look to speaking as a freedom?

A necessity.
A preference.
A valid activity.
A wish.

Is it not a ghastly need for distraction or
assertion or escape from the body blow of listening.
The intimacies of silence?

I write because it is quieter and private.

I need to make sounds to make me feel bigger.

My desire to make sound is penetrative.
It is male in me. It is me trying to get out
of my body, into another space,
and shoot, dump, offer, commune the things I burst
with.

There is the possibility of Fertilisation.
Anonymity. Action. Conflict. Song. Joining.
Responsibility. Calling. Emptiness to start all over.
Being known, loved, played with, held, made
beautiful. Buried.

It is a risk to speak, but not to talk.
It is a risk
To hear myself hearing.
That is the replenishment. It contains an imperative,
always, that is to love more and say less.

When I read the question, there is a clamouring of vying, incongruent urgent has been and would-be-voices with different insistencies.

I want to speak about money. Relinquishment. Enough.

I want to speak about the health of illness.

I want to speak about not accepting the times I live in.

I want to speak about blue.

I want to say something that would make me feel I had said something.

I want to speak of the failure of help.

I want to speak off the pavement, away from this unconvincing world.

I want to speak intelligent and beautiful.

I want to speak, no, remind myself, of the danger of speaking too much and too loud and to realign myself with the cries and whispers.

Sarah Hopkins

Control, the control we try to avoid, we live under (within a system). The subtle controls within relationships (my own experience). Control from men and now my over reactive, over protective response to control. Maintaining my independence and self – I am very sensitive to any type of control method to undermine me, take my energy, get me. I pose a challenge and therefore my self is attacked and challenged regularly (by male and female). My freedom is all powerful and pervasive and provocative. My freedom has been fought for, and subtle ways of control to hinder my freedom will be savagely disrespected. Its taken a lot to get here – it will not be given away. I speak about control.

Pauline Amos

**Melanie Thompson, 2/5/02 12.45 pm +0000,
Re: what do I want to speak about?**

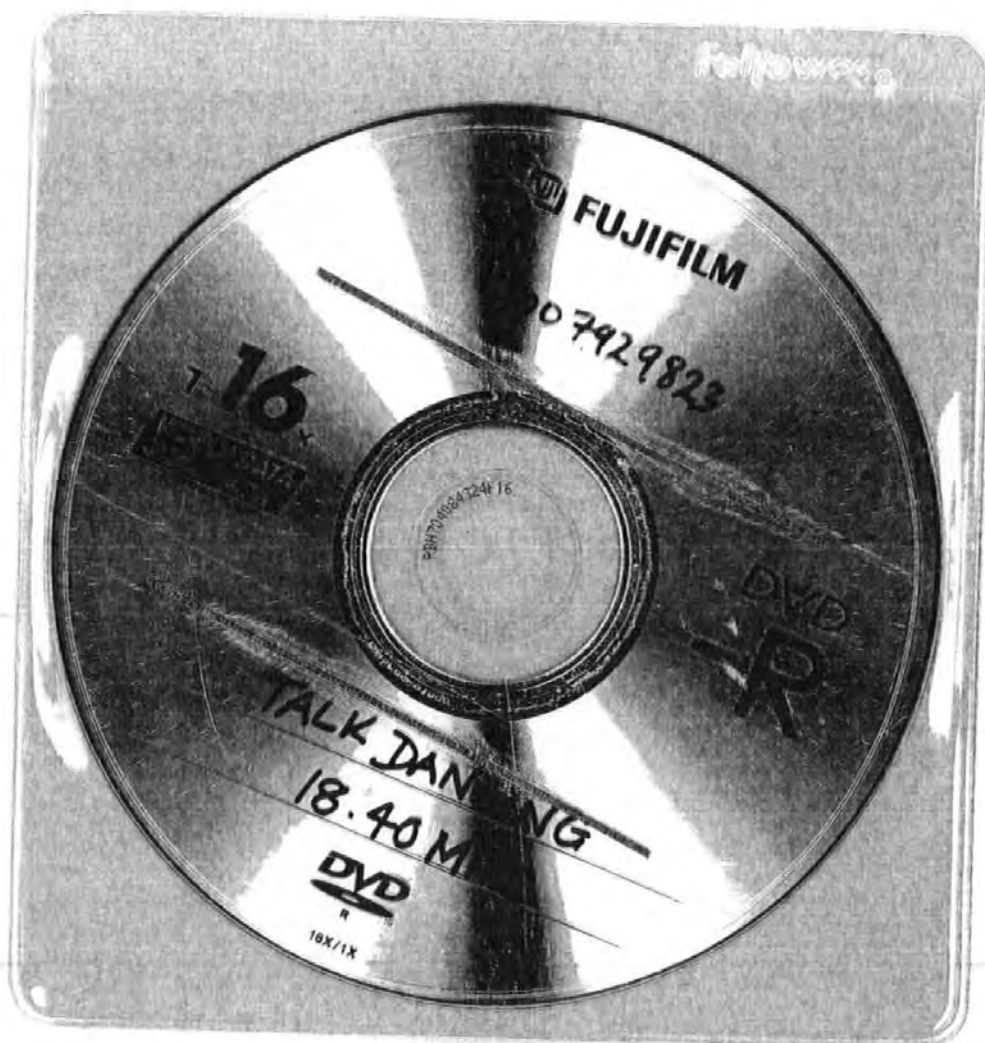
<dear barbara-what do i want to speak about?
my concerns at the moment are the nature of
space and place, love and growing old.....
these are issues that are important to me
now in my emotional and professional life.

what do i want to speak about - the pain of
being human, the struggle to be alive
properly and not duck out when the going
gets tough, the desire to love and to be
loved,
the awareness of time passing so fast and
not wanting to cling on to it, to be calm
about it, to watch it shift and change and
not panic....to understand space and place
more deeply in my work to dig deep into the
theory surrounding it and immerse myself in
it as if in healing mud.....to interact, to be
in the life not looking on, to be proactive
to engage and be engaged.....i could go on
i dont know what you want?
here is some.....melanie

Printed for Barbara Bridger <b.bridger@dartington.ac.uk>

TALK DANCING

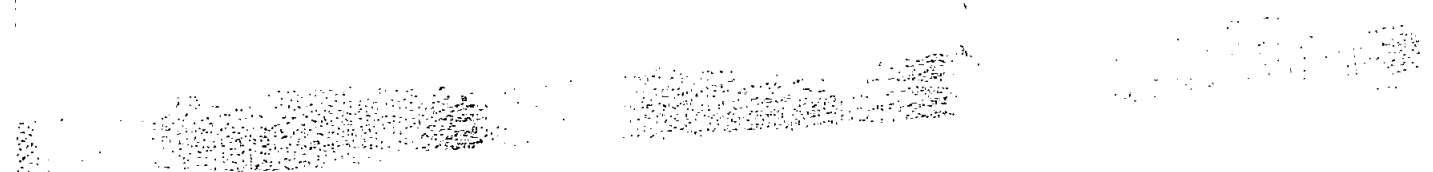
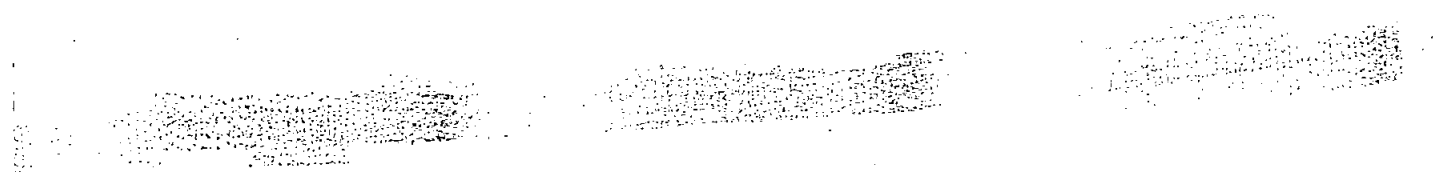
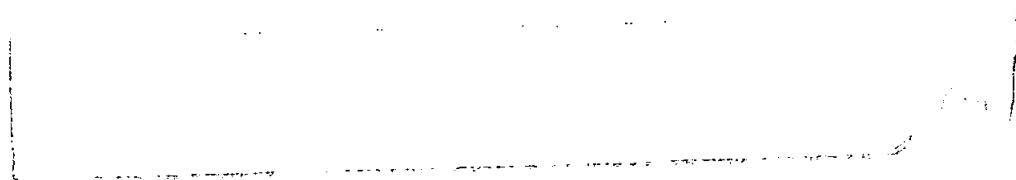
digital film, black and white, length: approximately 20 minutes.



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Booklet containing written responses to the question,
'What is it you wish to speak of?'



Appendix Three

Content

Unannotated full version of *The True Aerialist*

Prose version as published in *Feminist Review* 84, 2006,
Post Colonial Theatres, p141

THE TRUE AERIALIST

Subtitled

THE ANGEL IN THE HOUSE

A WOMAN DRESSED IN AN ECLECTIC RANGE OF STYLES CROSSES THE SPACE CASTING ONE FURIOUS SIDEWAYS GLANCE AT THE AUDIENCE BEFORE EXITING. THE SAME WOMAN RE-ENTERS AND REPEATS HER ACTIONS. THE SAME WOMAN RE-ENTERS A THIRD TIME, STOPS MID-SPACE AND TAKES UP A JABBING, POINTING ACTION AIMED AT THE AUDIENCE. AFTER A SECOND OR TWO HER FINGER BECOMES OUT OF CONTROL AND TURNS TOWARDS HER MAKING FOR HER MOUTH AND FORCING ITSELF DOWN HER THROAT, CHOKING OUT HER FIRST WORDS

I.....(TRIUMPHANTLY).....I lie....

CLAMPS RIGHT HAND OVER MOUTH. REMOVES IT WITH DIFFICULTY USING OTHER HAND.

....constantly. I deceive....

CLAMPS RIGHT HAND OVER MOUTH AGAIN AND AGAIN REMOVES IT WITH DIFFICULTY.

.....perpetually. I

LOOKS AT HAND AS IF EXPECTING IT TO COVER MOUTH. IT DOESN'T.

...I conceal...

INSTEAD HAND CLAMPS OVER EYES. SHE STRUGGLES TO REMOVE.

what I see.

LOOKS ABOUT FURTIVELY

And I pretend....

LOOKS ABOUT AGAIN

.....what I am. Believe me.

BECOMES CONFIDENTIAL

Oh believe me - you can't. (SHOUTS) Because...

LOOKS ABOUT

(WHISPERS) Nothing about me is true.

HAND OVER MOUTH, EYES MOVE FROM SIDE TO SIDE. REMOVES HAND WITH DIFFICULTY. FINGER STARTS JABBING, IS RETRIEVED BY OTHER HAND AND PLACED ACROSS LIPS.

Shush, keep quiet, don't spill the beans.

FINGER MAKES BID FOR NOSTRIL

Aah!

FINGERS HOLD NOSE.

(SINGS) Aah, aah.

SMACKS HAND OFF NOSE, SINGS UP SCALE. (Ah, ah, ah, etc.)
(SINGS ON A LONG NOTE) Aria!

Even my voice is false - an echo

VOICE OFF (MALE) SINGS FALSETTO Aria!

Falsetto. So please do not count on my ethnic origin.

PULLS ONE EYE DOWN, TWISTS EAR

It reveals nothing of my date of birth.

LAUGHS JOYOUSLY, COVERS MOUTH. REMOVES HAND, STICKS OUT TONGUE.

Why even my tongue - (SPEAKS IN FOREIGN LANGUAGE) My mother tongue. (TRANSLATES) My mother tongue. (SIGNS) Says nothing. (TRANSLATES) Says nothing. But a mother tongue has gender at least, whereas I - what am I?

HOLDS FOREFINGER UP AND EXAMINES IT.

Mutable?

FOLLOWS OUTSTRETCHED FINGER MOVING DIAGONALLY

Transverse perhaps? What do you think? Have a guess. Go on, do us a favour.

ZIG ZAGS WITH FINGER.

Left or right? In or out? Back to front? What's it to be? 50/50? 30/70? 100 to one? Well you're wrong. Wrong, wrong, Naa, naa, na, naa, naa.

FINGER POINTS TO BREAST.

I won.

FINGER MAKES PENIS

I won. I'm unclassifiable.

WAVES BOTTOM AT AUDIENCE, POINTS AT IT.

The class of my arse changes all the time.

You can't relay on it. Some days I can't even sit on it. But on such days, on such sweet spring days, when the dew gathers on my fingertips. On such fine, blue days I can - always....

STANDS AND OPENS OUT A PAIR OF WINGS

Fly. (PROUDLY) They are my own wings. There is no artifice in them.

EXAMINES WINGS

Some glue perhaps.

SHAKES WINGS OUT

But I will not deny them for a moment. I'm no angel, but that's another matter. The shaft of my feathers is my own affair - entirely.

TAKES KNICKERS OFF.

(DECLAIMS) I fly by the seat of my pants!

PUTS KNICKERS ON HEAD LIKE FLYING HELMET/GOGGLES

(DECLAIMS) On a wing and a prayer! So wish me luck, because you never know....Christ you never know.....

KNEELS TO PRAY

(ASIDE) Superstition being the enemy of belief. You never know....(DECLAIMS) Oh god, please let me come up on the lottery! Yes, I'll buy a ticket. And if you see me praying in my lottery booth - my twentieth century confessional - remember -

STANDS, HOOKS ON WIRE

I'm hooked.

OPENS WINGS CEREMONIOUSLY AND VERY SLOWLY RISES INTO THE AIR, HANDS PRAYING, ONE LEG CROOKED LIKE AN ANGEL TO THE MUTED STRAINS OF A SILVERY BOY SOPRANO SINGING A RELIGIOUS ANTHEM

This is inspirational. The sky is radiant. I fly - a silver meteor in it's twinkling blueness! I fly - a stainless shard piercing the velvet of night! I fly - a mote of mercury beading the crested ocean! I fly.....

STARES BALEFULLY AT AUDIENCE, DROPS WINGS

Oh come on, it's allowed - a little lyricism, a little lyric, a moment of romance - surely it's allowed?

FLAPPING WINGS BUT NOT GETTING VERY FAR.

You can't deny poetry - my soul in verse, a version of my soul, subversion of your soul, through my.....

LIFTS WINGS IN DRAMATIC GESTURE

.....art!

POSING WITH WINGS EXTENDED

What an image, what an imagining.

TURNING ROUND TO DISPLAY WINGS, SPEAKING OVER SHOULDER.

Imagination being art.

OVER OTHER SHOULDER

Some say.

BEATING WINGS RHYTHMICALLY

I am a star, I am a star, I am a star, I am above it all, above you all. An artiste of the air, full of wind and piss. Spraying you from a great height.

INSTRUMENTAL VERSION OF ROY ORBISON'S SONG 'CRYING' BEGINS

Look at me. Just look at me!

FLIES AROUND, SINGS.

Flying over you. Flying over you.

Good aren't I? Terrific. I'm wonderful, wondrous, I'm a bleeding wonder I am. (SINGS) Flying over you, over you, over yooooou.

MUSIC STOPS WITH SCRAPE OF NEEDLE.

WOMAN LOOKS ANXIOUSLY TO SIDE STAGE.

What? No, no I haven't....no, no wing licence.

CLEARs THROAT, SPEAKS FORMALLY TO AUDIENCE

It has occurred to me that I have no artistic licence for my superior state.

DROPS ON WIRE SUDDENLY, LOOKS DOWN ANXIOUSLY

It has further come to my notice that....DROPS

I can't....DROPS AGAIN

Ah shit - it's like one of those dreams - you're flying quite happily, superiorly in fact, and then....DROPS

you suddenly realise.....

WIRE DROPS SO HAS TO LIFT FEET TO AVOID LANDING

But regulations aren't everything. Oh ho, no ho! You can buck the system.

STARTS FLAPPING WINGS

Fight the bureaucracy.

FLAPS FRANTICALLY

You can stop hanging about and....and.....and....

FLAPS AND KICKS LEGS BESERKLY

You can, you can, argh, ooh, oh oh, help me help me, please, please, help me.

SCREAMING WINGS WIDE

Help!

CLOSES WINGS AGAIN, HANGS FROM THE WIRE LIKE A STRINGLESS PUPPET

Sorry - really - very sorry. I was carried away. Taken for a ride. I was strung along. Puppetry has a lot to answer for. Talk about suspension of belief. It's asking a lot of a liar like me. There's a real danger I could get hung here - lynched for my upward mobility. To think.....has I come to this? Has it?

TRIES TO FLY BUT WINGS KEEP DROPPING, HANGS INERT

Now I know how Tinkerbell felt. It isn't fair - no - liar that I am, stuck up as I may be - I can't help having aspirations.

TRIES TO FLY BUT WINGS KEEP DROPPING. BRUSHES SELF DOWN AND TRIES TO LOOK UNCONCERNED, HANGS FOR SOME TIME SUCKING A FEATHER, SIGHS, THROWS FEATHER AWAY

Ah well, I was never a true aerialist. I was never a real flyer. No head for heights you see - not enough levity in my thoughts. I lack confidence. I can't ride a bicycle or swim. SIGHS AGAIN. Yes, on many counts my expectation of levitation was unrealistic. Given my many shortcomings. But.....well it's a tendency I have. Despite all - I tend to the unreal.

SYNTHESIZED MOOD MUSIC, FLAPS ONE WING, FLAPS THE OTHER

I am subject to flights of fantasy.

FLAPS BOTH AND RISES UP, BECOMES UNSTABLE, SWINGS AND SWAYS
RECKLESSLY

I get above myself.

JOLTS TO A HALT, MUSIC STOPS ABRUPTLY
FOLDS WINGS AGAIN AND HANGS LIMPLY

I put myself in a vertiginous position - up here where the oxygen is thin.

CLAPS ARMS AROUND WINGS AND DROPS TO FEET

Better to have my feet on the ground.

UNHOOKS WIRE, LIES DOWN

My nose to the grindstone.

THUMPS FLOOR

Real life, real work, real, honest to goodness, made with natural ingredients, at
the kitchen sink, tell it like it is. Let mine be a true story. A real story. Starting
here, now. Shall we.....?

STANDS

And the earth was waste and void; and darkness was upon the face of the deep:
and the spirit of god moved upon the face of the waters.

ROLLS UP SKIRT TO FORM PREGNANT SHAPE

There, they won't hang me now, I can't get strung up in this state. I'm safe....for
now..

SQUATS, STRAINS

Until after the birth

LAYS EGG

Of my beginning.

PICKS UP EGG

(SENTIMENTAL) My beginning.

PRODUCES ANOTHER EGG FROM MOUTH AND ONE FROM BEHIND EAR. JUGGLES WITH THE EGGS, DROPS ONE, LOOKS FROM IT TO THE AUDIENCE.

The big bang theory?

THROWS REST TO FLOOR

So much for beginnings - Once upon a time, long ago, as I've heard tell, there was, as there might well be....(IRRITABLE) Well are you sitting comfortably? Quite sure? Then I'll begin. (WHISPERS) There was once a story, a narrative no less. And it was huge, essential, overarching and predictable and we all looked up to it and aspired to it in every waking moment of our dreary little lives, we woke up from dreams of it and went to sleep praying for it. There.... isn't that nice. A nice story eh? A story with a....

HOLDS HANDS HIGH ABOVE HEAD

....beginning

POINTS AT PREGNANT STOMACH

a middle...and (MUTTERS) an end. (SHOUTS) I said an end.

MUSIC 'SOMEWHERE OVER THE RAINBOW'. PUTS HAND OVER EYES AND LOOKS INTO THE DISTANCE

Hey is that a rainbow up there?

DROPS ARM DESPONDENTLY

No, just a trick of the light.

SIGHS

A trick, a story that no-one believes in any more. Because no-one believes in nothing. Except the lottery. Two minuses don't make a plus. First there was eggs and then there was mess.

JUMPING TO ONE SIDE AS IF TWO CHARACTERS ADDRESSING EACH OTHER.

Who made this bloody mess and who's going to clear it up?

I'm not.

Why not?

Because it's not my turn.

Why not?

You just said that.

So what?

So now it's your turn.

What?

Your turn to clear up

Why?

Because you spoke first.

Did I?

Yes.

So?

So I've got the last word.

So?

So the last word is you've got to clear up

Well I won't.

NO REPLY

I said I won't.

NO REPLY

That was the last word.

NO REPLY

I said the last word.

NO REPLY

Are you listening?

NO REPLY

Are you there?

NO REPLY

Is there anybody....

SLAPS HEAD.

Oh no! What am I doing? What am I saying? You see what happens when you take a beginning - an egg for instance - do you hear what you get? Dialogue that's what. Talk, conversation, chit chat, words and more words until you've got verbal diarrhoea until you're sick with it. First there were eggs and then there was mess, followed by salmonella. But I'm not going to clear it up I'm not going to cook up this story because I told you, I don't believe in it anymore.

DOES A DANCE OF LIBERATION AND SLIPS ON THE EGGS AND FALLS

I believe...I believe....

INSTRUMENTAL VERSION OF SONG, 'I believe (for every drop of rain that falls a flower grows etc.) MOVING TO MUSIC TRIES TO GET UP, SLIPS, SLIDING FLOOR DANCE TO SHOUTS OF:-

I believe - in - in the lottery - and....and then? And then? And then nothing, no birth, no death, no heaven, no re-incarnation, no over the rainbow, just....just.....

WIRE SHOPPING TROLLEY ROLLS SLOWLY ON

Shopping? We all believe in Shopping.

KNEELS AT TROLLEY

We believe in prayer within the sacred aisles.
(SINGS IN STYLE OF PRAYER RESPONSES) Oh god please give me bargains.
On which to spend my winnings. That I may profit from my greed.
(SPEAKS) I believe in spends.

PULLS OUT FEATHER, THROWS UP IN AIR, CHASES IT WITH TROLLEY

How much is that? I'll have it - give it me. I want one.

PULLS OUT SECOND FEATHER

I want two.

PULLS OUT MORE

I want them all, I need them all.

LOOKING IN EMPTY TROLLEY

I must eat after all. A conglomerate must be fed - supplied with the choicest ingredients - no rotten apples - no maggots veg.

LIES UNDER TROLLEY WITH MOUTH OPEN

Gimme- gimme - some - I want - gimme.

SMACKS LIPS, LICKS WIRE

I must eat, I must, or....or die, or wilt and wither, or rot and decay, fester, fall into
filth, turn into tilth.

RACES TROLLEY BACKWARDS AND FOREWARDS OVER SELF

Eat, eat, grow, grow, move, shift, no moss, no sweet rotting, no fullness of time
fermentation, no rich matter, no mulch, eat, eat, grow, grow, move shift
(SCREAMS) Jesus, it's ripping my face off!

PUSHES TROLLEY AWAY, ROLLS INTO BALL

No, no more, leave me, leave me, I want to rest, I want to gather my strength
ready to germinate - a sweet curled budding, a milk veined shoot, I want to
grow, I want to grow, I want to grow.....organically.

STARTING TO UNFOLD.

One, two, three, four, seventy-six.

GROWTH ARRESTED

Alright, five.

STILL UNABLE TO 'GROW'

Eleven then.

GROWTH CONTINUES TO BE ARRESTED

Eleven? (PAUSE) I don't know why. It's random. Completely. A creative
calculation, a spiritual speculation. Butoh elevenplease! (PAUSE)
(ANSWERING) Alright, nineteen. (PAUSE) (ANSWERING DEFIANT)
Because it's my birthday, yes the nineteenth and I am growing....up!

SHOOTS UP TO FULL HEIGHT

And my playing...

LOUD CIRCUS MUSIC, ROLLS, SOMERSAULTS, EXECUTES A SERIES OF
OVERUSED MIME EXERCISES. PAUSES PANTING

Is getting chronic

RESUMES FRANTIC CIRCUS/MIME ACTIVITIES

Inappropriate for someone my age. I'm beginning to wonder what it means.

IS HIT BY AN INVISIBLE FORCE HARD ON THE HEAD. THIS AND EACH
SUBSEQUENT BLOW IS ACCOMPANIED BY A LOUD BANG.

God alive.

HIT AGAIN

Aah!

FALLS TO FLOOR AND IS KICKED

Aah, oh!

SITS UP

What does this mean?

IS HIT WITH TREMENDOUS FORCE. FALLS DOWN

For pity's sake. I didn't really mean it. Not for a moment.

KICKED

Meaning means nothing to me.

KICKED

My content is

KICKED

argh, uncontentious.

CRAWLING

My sub-text is completely

KICKED

ooh, subjugated. I do not mean anything. Try to believe

LIES PRONE

that I lie

FACE SLAPPED

emphatically, that I deceive...

FACE SLAPPED

thematically. I lie...

WAITS FOR BLOW WHICH DOES NOT COME

(RELIEVED) I lie. I lie. It is in my nature.

DUCKS BLOW

No please. I may have nature but look.

HOLDS OUT WINGS

I am also artifice. I didn't grow them. And my play.....

DUCKS

.....ing is serious....objective.

STANDS CAUTIOUSLY WAITING FOR RESPONSE. FLINCHES A COUPLE OF TIMES BEFORE REGAINING CONFIDENCE AND PUTTING AWAY WINGS.

Objective. Yes, you can't object to that. The object...

HOLDS OUT CLASPED HANDS TO THE OTHER SIDE

The object as opposed to the subject.

SLAMS CLASPED HANDS ON STOMACH.

As opposed to me. Leave me alone for a minute will you, and

HOLDS OUT CLASPED HANDS TO THE FRONT

take a look at that.

HOLDS OUT CLASPED HANDS TO THE SIDE

At this

HOLDS OUT CLASPED HANDS TO OTHER SIDE

at that. What does

HOLDS OUT LEFT HAND PALM EXTENDED, POINTS TO IT WITH RIGHT

that say to you?

POINTING FINGER BENDS AROUND UNTIL IT POINTS AT HER.

Not about me.

USES LEFT HAND TO RE EXTEND PALM OF POINTING HAND AND CLASPS HANDS AGAIN.

This is independent of me. That isn't mine. I don't own it. (SADLY) But then I never did.

MELANCHOLY ABSTRACT VIOLIN MUSIC. HOLDS CLASPED HANDS TO EAR. SWAYS TO MUSIC. LISTENING TO HANDS.

Oh I kidded myself but.....looking back. I can see....well, there was a time when I truly desired this beautiful object. I was enchanted by its colour - viridian of deep undergrowth blending into the cerulean blue of a summer sky. I was obsessed by the exquisite turn on the handle which rested so warm and smooth in my hand. I adored it. I felt part of the history of every person who had ever touched it and I often wept for the integrity of the artisan who made it. The glaze on this object mirrored my face and blinded me. I loved it, I loved it....but now.....well the object and I no longer have a relationship....

MUSIC ENDS WITH SCRAPE OF NEEDLE

We are not even friends. This object and I ...

HAND CLAMPS OVER MOUTH. TRIES TO SIGN THE WORDS
Can't communicate SEVERAL TIMES BUT FAILS.

(SPEAKS) Can't communicate.

HOLDS CLASPED HANDS TO EAR, VIOLIN STARTS AGAIN.

We are estranged. It's better that way. I mean what can you say....

EXTENDS ONE PALM AND POINTS TO IT

to an object like this? Nothing. There is nothing between us any more.
Nothing to say.

CLAPS HANDS

There is nothing there.

EXTENDING BOTH OPEN PALMS TO EITHER SIDE, ASKS AUDIENCE.

Is there? Objectively....From an objective point of view - absolutely nothing there - eh? Would you agree? (SHOCKED) You would? Now hold on a minute. I could be lying, I could be pretending. Let's not get too carried away here. Eh?

OPENS WINGS

There's these - OK so I could never hold a tune, but let's not go straight for the negative scenario. Benefit of the doubt eh? (TOMMY COOPER) Cup - ball, ball - cup Now you see it, now you don't - don't - don't. You don't see it? You don't see anything?

FALLS TO KNEES

Oh my god! Then you can see I am without object? You perceive my lack of intent?

HEAD IN HANDS

I am stripped naked. Oh horror. I never thought it would come to this. What am I to do? I must do something, I must be something.....

JUMPS UP AND STARTS RUNNING BACKWARDS AND FORWARDS
TAKING LITTLE JUMPS AND FLAPPING WINGS

I know, I'll become a desperate character. No that's wrong. My character will become desperate. Is she? Desperate? What the hell? Who the hell? I don't know.

STOPS

I must think. No I must feel....my character. The desperation in my character. But I am a character. I am a character. A desperate woman. Oh I am, I am....desperate. I could do anything. I could be anything. I could be....I could be....female? Well obviously, an obvious female, a stereotype, I could be that, easy. Why not? A tart for instance - yes.

TAKES KNICKERS OFF HEAD. RIPS THE CRUTCH. PUTS THEM ON.
LICKS FINGER. ARRANGES EYEBROWS. LICKS FINGER AGAIN, INSERTS
IN SPLIT IN KNICKERS.

Oh yes I could pop up a tart.

REMOVES FINGER AND EXAMINES IT, HOLDS IT UP, LIFTS OTHER
HAND EXTENDS ALL FINGERS.

An old pro. - "Thirty quid, I'll do you a blow for thirty." - Who's a drug addict - "Fifty for the full works, front or back." - with a vicious pimp - "Double it for any S and M." She's innocent really - "Two hundred with trimmings, costume, paraphernalia. You'll like it, I'm pierced throughout." Vice less in her own completely corrupt way - "Give us two fifty and you get the vid." Yes, I

could be a typical tart. I'd make a good stereotype. But stereo's out of date aint it? Well I bloody hope it is. All those dualities, dichotomies, dialectical binaries - deconstructed - yeah - for good. It's not technology now it's technologies, it's CD s, it's digital, it's E mail. Fucking, faxing, factions, at a local level that is. Whilst somewhere else, over the rainbow, outa sight, it's global, megabites, multi sensory, it's millennium, monumental, it's mythic. It's Medea. Oh yes! Oh yes, I could do that, what she did. I could kill my bloody children, I'd enjoy that. She was desperate - too fucking right. I'm not that desperate, but I think about it sometimes -when they get on my nerves and if he's playing up Well her chap played her up proper - Old Jason. Yeah, he was a right bad lad. And she knew. And she decided....And if they're all getting me down I think about my knife drawer. I count up the blades - serrated bread knife - meat cleaver. That steel carver with the bone handle. The old ones sharpen up best. Yeah she had intent - Old Medea. She had....she had....but...but I.....but....Ibut I haven't. I'd just be pretending. Lying again. Pretending to pretend. But to be honest....(SNIVELS) which I know is a contradiction in terms with me.....but sometimes.....I just feel.....you can stick your cyber culture.....your ontological insecurity.....I just want.....I just wish...sometimes.....(CRIES)...all the time.....I do.....just.....(HOWLS) Well I do miss Medea!

LOUD DRAMATIC SYMPHONIC MUSIC (WAGNER, THE MUSIC OF THE VALKYRIES) WOMAN CRIES FOR A TIME.

I'm sorry, but no character can be completely without emotion.
And I....I.....I feel.....something?

PAUSE

Psychology? (PERKING UP) Oh I wouldn't go so far as that. I wouldn't gesture that way.

MAKES EXAGGERATED AND REPEATED GESTURE WHICH SUGGESTS A PARTICULAR CHARACTER TYPE.

Or that way ANOTHER GESTURE
Or that way ANOTHER GESTURE

The gestures of my personality are more.....personal. They reflect my....selfhood. Self, GESTURE Self, GESTURE, Self, GESTURE. Yes, that's me. POKES CHEST WITH FINGER Self, self, self. I am selfish. Well, it's inevitable. After all.....there's only me, I'm the only one here....up here, exposed.

POINTS FINGER AT AUDIENCE

To you, to your.....(GETS TEARFUL AGAIN)

MELANCHOLY VIOLIN

I mean if someone else was with me, well, it'd be different. I wouldn't be so lonely for one thing. I wouldn't feel so completely....

MUSIC STOPS, FINGER TURNS ABRUPTLY AND POKES DIRECTLY IN EYE. FALLS TO KNEES.

Aah! Ah don't...don't mock. For Christ's sake don't mock me. I mean can't you see how....EXTENDS ARMS, VIOLIN PLAYS. I'm hurt....wounded. I'm a tragically scarred figure. Lonely, confused, damaged by deceit. How can you laugh? I mean, what do you think this is? Oh god, I wish I could escape....from this.....from this form... this form....ula.

MUSIC STOPS WITH SCRAPE OF NEEDLE.

Formula? Form - ula. Ula, ula? Sounds like an intimate body part. Ula....just down from the ova. Hot, engorged and covered in feathers. Feathers for flying.

GETS UP, OPENS WINGS, RUNS AND FLAPS WINGS TRYING TO TAKE OFF.

For flying away. I must escape. You must help me. Please.

SOMEONE THROWS A SMALL TIN INTO THE SPACE. THIS IS SEEN FIRSTLY AS AN ATTACK AND THEN CURIOSITY LEADS TO INVESTIGATION.

Escape?

OPENS THE TIN AND REMOVES LARGE REEFER. SMILES BROADLY.

Escape. Yeah, who needs wings. Chill out, hang out, drop out, (HUMS) Hey Mr. Tambourine man play a song for me, I'm not sleepy and (SINGS WORDS) there is no place I'm going to.

PULLS OUT FEATHER AND TUCKS IN TOBACCO MORE FIRMLY. STICKS FEATHER INTO HAIR.

Going nowhere, heading back, to just being.....happy. Because....happiness just is. Anywhere, anytime, it's complete, it's fulfilling, it's entertaining. Happiness

keeps you fully entertained. Yeah, that's the beauty of happiness - you need nothing else. Except....well maybe a bit of spare cash, yeah, if I won the lottery I reckon I'd really be happy.

PUTS REEFER IN MOUTH, CHECKS POCKETS FOR A LIGHT.

Oh shit! That's typical - you get within a sniff of happiness and you find you just aint got what it takes. I've got no funds, no wherewithal. My capital's incapable, my charisma's crap....I've got not light...no.....no light entertainment value at all.

CANNED LAUGHTER. WOMAN STARTS TO LAUGH AND CONTINUES UNTIL HER LAUGHTER BECOMES SOBBING.

Sometimes I really despair (BREAKS REEFER) of happiness.

MELANCHOLY ABSTRACT VIOLIN MUSIC

I think it's not for me, not for the likes of me. I want, I want, I just want - something - to happen. Anything can happen to someone like me. Who has no-one to be.....with...to do.....with. Who hasn't even an object....of desire.....about which.....Who has not time to be...gin.....or end. I have no chorus, no backing group Only you.

SIGHS DEEPLY AND MELODRAMATICALLY. THROWS TIN AWAY.

You lot - over there. Watching.....me. Making.....me.....feel.....

SIGHS AGAIN

You're so distant. Why are you so distant? Perhaps if we.....

MOVES IN AMONGST AUDIENCE

could get together - it might.....we might.....make things possible?
Flying for instance. I mean why use wires? When.....

SELECTS TWO PEOPLE, LEADS THEM INTO PERFORMANCE SPACE

(would you? And you?....Please?)

SOME IMPROVISATION MAY BE NECESSARY FROM NOW ON AS INDICATED

BY TEXT IN BRACKETS. ESSENTIAL TEXT IS NOT BRACKETED

we can....

STARTS TO INSTRUCT 'HELPERS'

(Just stand perfectly still/thank you. Bend knees. Good, good. And two other people....You'll do, right) Lift - me - up

CLAMBERS ON SHOULDERS

Mind the wings....don't damage the.....(careful, up, higher, right)
Now let go. Let me fly!

JUMPS. FALLS. GETS UP AND GLARES AT FOUR HELPERS.

See that? Did you see that? Yes well....so much for.....I should have known, I mean, I mean we're talking flying here, we're talking lift off, I mean, if weight ratio came into it a swan would never get off the ground and as for a pigeon.....

LONG PAUSE. SNIVELS A LITTLE. SHOUTS AT RETREATING HELPERS.

But they do - they do fly.

SYNTHESIZED MOOD MUSIC.

Don't they? Don't they? (WAITS FOR AUDIENCE RESPONSE)
I mean we've all seen then haven't we - up there - flying about? Suspended - despite our disbelief. We've seen them, haven't we? Did you say yes?
(WAITS FOR AUDIENCE RESPONSE) Did you say yes? Yes? Let me hear you say yeah.

HOLDS HAND TO EAR. SOUNDTRACK OF CROWD CHEERING.

Yeah? Yeah?

DEAFENING APPLAUSE, CHEERING, SCREAMING.

(SHOUTS) Oh praise the lottery! God bless Supermarkets and all who shop in them!

MUSIC STARTS AND BUILDS (INTRO. TO 'ONLY YOU')

(SEDUCTIVE) Deceit is so delicious. Pretence is pure pleasure. Lies are -

oh just loll out your tongue and lick up those lies. Ah believe me, you do believe me, I know you believe me. I can feel you believe me. Oh yes, this is it, this is the moment, this is the place, happiness, togetherness.....who needs a storyline - or an object - there is no crock of gold at the end of the rainbow, only me and you and yes, yes, it's true that....

STARTS TO SING/SPEAK LYRICS. VERY SLOW TEMPO

Only you can make this change in me.

LIGHTS START TO DIM

For it's true, you are my destiny. When you hold my hand

EXTENDS PALMS, CEREMONIALLY CURVES HAND ROUND EXTENDING TWO FINGERS, POINTING AT SELF.

I understand

STRIPS OFF OUTER CLOTHING TO REVEAL SILVER BODY SUIT

the magic that you do. You're my dream come true, my one and only you.

HOLDS ARMS UPWARDS AND OUTWARDS IN A CELEBRATORY FASHION

Only you can make this world seem right. Only you can make the darkness light.

HANGING STARS ARE LIT ONE BY ONE.

Only you and you alone can thrill me like you do. You're my dream come true, my one and

LIGHTS ARE ALMOST DOWN. A MOON IS LOWERED ON A WIRE AND WOMAN HOOKS HERSELF UP, OPENS HER WINGS AND FLIES AWAY.

LIGHTS DOWN. HER VOICE IN DISTANCE SINGS.

.....O....only you!

THE TRUE AERIALIST

Subtitled

THE ANGEL IN THE HOUSE

A WOMAN DRESSED IN AN ECLECTIC RANGE OF STYLES CROSSES THE SPACE CASTING ONE FURIOUS SIDEWAYS GLANCE AT THE AUDIENCE BEFORE EXITING. THE SAME WOMAN RE-ENTERS AND REPEATS HER ACTIONS. THE SAME WOMAN RE-ENTERS A THIRD TIME, STOPS MID-SPACE AND TAKES UP A JABBING, POINTING ACTION AIMED AT THE AUDIENCE. AFTER A SECOND OR TWO HER FINGER BECOMES OUT OF CONTROL AND TURNS TOWARDS HER MAKING FOR HER MOUTH AND FORCING ITSELF DOWN HER THROAT, CHOKING OUT HER FIRST WORDS

I..... I lie....

CLAMPS RIGHT HAND OVER MOUTH. REMOVES IT WITH DIFFICULTY USING OTHER HAND.

....constantly. I deceive.... perpetually. I conceal what I see and I pretend what

I am. Believe me, please believe me - you can't. Because nothing about me is

true. Even this voice is false; it's merely an echo, a fals...etto. So do not

count on my ethnic origin. It reveals nothing of my date of birth. My tongue,

my mother tongue: ma madonnaish tangen says nothing. Absolutischen null.

But a mother tongue has gender at least, whereas I - what am I? Mutable?

Transverse perhaps? What do you think? Have a guess. Go on, do us a favour.

Left or right? In or out? Back to front? What's it to be? 50/50? 30/70? 100 to

one?

Whatever you think you're wrong. Wrong, wrong, wrong.

I'm unclassifiable. The class of my arse changes all the time. You can't rely on it. Some days I can't even sit on it. But on such days, on such sweet

spring days, when the dew gathers on my fingertips. On such fine, blue days I can...always.... fly.

Like 'em? They're all mine, my own wings.

Oh yes, I can assure you there's no artifice here. Some glue perhaps and I'm no angel, but that's another matter. The shaft of my feathers is my own affair..... entirely. And don't jump to conclusions, I wear my knickers on my head for good reason. I fly by the seat of my pants, on a wing and a prayer. So wish me luck, because you never know.... Christ you never know! (Superstition being the enemy of belief.) Yes, you never know when you might come up on the lottery. So, I'll buy a ticket. And if you see me there, praying in my lottery booth - my twentieth century confessional - remember this: I'm hooked... hooked on flying, on swooping up and down, on wheeling about. Watch me, watch me. Here I come again. Look out! Duck! Whee! And up.

Oh, this is marvellous, inspirational. The sky is radiant, I fly, a silver meteor in its twinkling blueness. I fly, a stainless shard piercing the velvet of night. I fly a mote of mercury beading the crested ocean. I fly...

What's the matter? Oh come on, it's allowed - a little lyricism, a little lyric, a moment of romance - surely it's allowed? You can't deny poetry: my soul in verse, a version of my soul, subversion of your soul, through my...art! You can't deny me that imagining. Imagination being art.....some say.

Look at me, I am a star, I am a star, I am a star, I am above it all, above you all. An artiste of the air, full of wind and piss, spraying you from a great

height. Look at me. Just look at me. I'm good aren't I? Terrific. I'm...what? What was that? Have I got a what? No, no I haven't, no... no wing licence. I didn't think.... Really? Well, sorry, but I have no artistic licence for my superior state. In fact, steady on, oh hell, oh no... I can't...Ah shit! It's like one of those dreams - you're flying quite happily, superiorly in fact and then.... you suddenly realise.....but just a minute, regulations aren't everything. Oh ho, no ho! You can buck the system. Fight the bureaucracy. You can stop hanging about and....and..... and....LOOK OUT!!!

Sorry - really - very sorry, I'll just keep quiet now. I'll just hang loose. All that struggle was a mistake. I was carried away, taken for a ride. I was strung along. Puppetry has a lot to answer for. Talk about suspension of belief. It's asking a lot of a liar like me. So I'll shut up, because there's a real danger I could get hung up here - lynched for my upward mobility. To think...has it come to this? Has it? Now I know how Tinkerbell felt. It isn't fair, no, liar that I am, stuck up as I may be, I don't deserve this. I mean who doesn't have aspirations? Who doesn't want to go up in life? For this I should be so lampooned? To find my higher ambitions so bureaucratically bruised, so irretrievably damaged, well, it's hard to cope with. I.... I wonder.... could I have that feather back? It does suit you too, yes, there's no denying that, but I feel the lack: a failing follicle cannot be finally ignored. Thank you. I am grateful.

But to be honest, which as you know I never am, I was never a real flyer. No head for heights you see; not enough levity in my thoughts. I lack confidence. I can't ride a bicycle or swim. Yes, on many counts my expectation of levitation was unrealistic. Given my many shortcomings. But...well it's a tendency I have. Despite all, I tend to the unreal. I am subject to flights of fantasy. I get above myself. I put myself in a vertiginous position, like this, quite often. Then when I find the oxygen is thin...

Better to have my feet on the ground. Yes, I'm coming down, I've pressed the descend button. Here I come. That's it. A little bump and out at ground level. Back to scrambling down on the street, nose to the grindstone, shoulder to the wheel, hands to the plough, eyes on the ball. Back to getting in touch with reality, with work. Real life, real work, real, honest to goodness, made with natural ingredients, at the kitchen sink, tell it like it is. Let mine be a true story. A real story. Starting here, now.

'And the earth was waste and void; and darkness was upon the face of the deep: and the spirit of god moved upon the face of the waters.'

I'm so pregnant with possibility now they won't hang me. No, you can't get strung up in this state. I'm safe until after the birth of my beginning. Ah my sweet beginning, my little offspring. Here look, let me show you my egg, look there, isn't it perfect? A perfect beginning. I'm so proud I.... oh whoops! Silly me. What a mess on the floor. Oh well, another false start, but I'll tell you anyway:

Once upon a time, long ago, as I've heard tell, there was, as there might well be... Are you sitting comfortably? Quite sure? Then I'll begin. There was once a story, a narrative no less. And it was huge, essential, overarching and predictable and we all looked up to it. We looked up to it for so long we got a crick in our necks, but still we craned our eyes skywards saying things like: 'Hey is that a rainbow up there?

Well no it isn't I'm afraid, it's just a trick of the light. A trick, a story that no one believes in any more. Because no one believes in nothing. Except the lottery. And let's face it, two minuses don't make a plus, even to a two faced liar like me. It doesn't make sense and in the end, when you get past the prologue and the heart of the matter and you finally arrive at the epilogue, all I know is, first there was eggs and then there was a mistake.

So I ask myself,

Who made this bloody mess and who's going to clear it up?

I'm not.

Why not?

Because it's not my turn.

Why not?

You just said that.

So what?

So now it's your turn.

What?

Your turn to clear up

Why?

Because you spoke first.

Did I?

Yes.

So?

So I've got the last word.

So?

So the last word is you've got to clear up

Well I won't.....I said I won't. That was the last word. I said the last word. Are you listening? Are you there? Is there anybody....?'

Oh no! What am I doing? What am I saying? You see what happens when you take a beginning, an egg for instance. You get plot, then you get dialogue, talk, conversation, chit chat, words and more words until you've got verbal diarrhoea, until you're sick with it. First there were eggs and then there was mess, followed by salmonella. But I'm not going to clear it up I'm not going to cook up this story because I told you, I don't believe in it anymore.

I believe...I believe...I believe... in... in the lottery... and....and then? And then? And then nothing, no birth, no death, no heaven, no re-incarnation, no over the rainbow, just.... just...supermarkets? We all believe in supermarkets. We believe in prayer within the sacred aisles.

*Oh god please give me bargains.
On which to spend my winnings.
That I may profit from my greed.*

I believe in spends. How much is that? I'll have it - give it me. I want one. I want two. I want them all, I need them all. I must eat after all. A conglomerate must be fed, supplied with the choicest ingredients - no rotten apples - no maggoty veg. Gimme- gimme - some - I want - gimme. I must eat, I must, or.... or die, or wilt and wither, or rot and decay, fester, fall into filth, turn into tilth. Let me eat so I can germinate - a sweet curled budding, a milk veined shoot. Let me eat, eat, grow, grow, move, shift. No moss, no sweet rotting, no fullness of time fermentation, no rich matter, no mulch, eat, eat, grow, grow, move shift. I want to grow, I want to grow, I want to grow...organically. It is the healthiest way after all. The only way you can count on. Can I start now?

Thank you. One, two, three, four, seventy-six. No? Alright, five. What's wrong with five? Nothing? OK, try eleven then. Eleven? I don't know why. It's random. Completely. A creative calculation, a spiritual speculation. But...oh eleven...please! Alright, nineteen. Nineteen because it's my birthday, yes the nineteenth and I am growing.... up! And my playing...is getting chronic, inappropriate for someone my age. I'm beginning to wonder what it means.

Ow! Why did you do that? Ooof! Why are you hitting me? Aah! That hurts. What does this mean? Owowow! For pity's sake. I didn't really mean it. Not for a moment. To save any more mindless violence let me assure you that meaning means nothing to me. My content is uncontentious. My sub-text is completely subjugated. I do not mean anything. Try to believe that I lie emphatically, that I deceive..... thematically. I lie, I lie. I lie. It is in my nature. No please, don't hit me for that. I may have nature but look here at my wings. I am also artifice. I didn't grow them. My playing may be chronic but it's also serious. It's objective.

Objective. Yes, you can't object to that. The object...the object as opposed to the subject. As opposed to me. Leave me alone for a minute will you, and take a look at that, at this, at that. What does that say to you? Not about me. This is independent of me. That isn't mine. I don't own it. But then I never did. Oh I kidded myself but...looking back. I can see.... well, there was a time when I truly desired this beautiful object. I was enchanted by its colour: viridian of deep undergrowth blending into the cerulean blue of a summer sky. I was

obsessed by the exquisite turn on the handle that rested so warm and smooth in my hand. I adored it. I felt part of the history of every person who had ever touched it and I often wept for the integrity of the artisan who made it. The glaze on this object mirrored my face and blinded me. I loved it, I loved it.... but now...well the object and I no longer have a relationship. We are not even friends. This object and I can't communicate. We are estranged. It's better that way. I mean what can you say to an object like this? Nothing. There is nothing between us any more. Nothing to say because there is nothing there. Is there? Objectively.... from an objective point of view: absolutely nothing there. Would you agree? You would?

Now hold on a minute. Remember me? I could be lying, I could be pretending. Let's not get too carried away here. OK so I could never hold a tune, but let's not go straight for the negative scenario. Benefit of the doubt eh?

Glass - bottle, bottle - glass.

I'm quoting Tommy Cooper now you understand. Now you see it, now you don't, don't, don't. You don't see it? You don't see anything? Oh no! Then you can see I am without object? You perceive my lack of intent? I am stripped naked. Oh horror. I never thought it would come to this.... what am I to do? I must do something; I must be something...

I know, I'll become a desperate character. No that's wrong. My character will become desperate. Is she? Desperate? What the hell? Who the

hell? I don't know. I must think. No I must feel.... my character. The desperation in my character. But I am a character. I am a character.

A desperate woman. Oh I am, I am.... desperate. I could do anything. I could be anything. I could be.... I could be.... female? Well obviously, an obvious female, a stereotype, I could be that, easy. Why not? A tart for instance - yes I could pop up a tart. An old pro. "Thirty, I'll do you a blow for thirty." Who's a drug addict. "Fifty for the full works, front or back." With a vicious pimp "Double it for any S and M." She's innocent really. "Two hundred with trimmings, costume, parafinalia. You'll like it, I'm pierced throughout." Viceless in her own completely corrupt way: "Give us two fifty and you get the vid."

Yes, I could be a typical tart. I'd make a good stereotype. But stereo's out of date aint it? Well I bloody hope it is. All those dualities, dichotomies, dialectical binaries - deconstructed - yeah - for good. It's not technology now it's technologies, it's digital, it's E mail. Fucking, faxing, factions, at a local level that is. Whilst somewhere else, over the rainbow, outa sight, it's global, megabytes, multi sensory, it's post-millennium, monumental, it's mythic. It's Medea.

Oh yes! Oh yes, Medea. Now there's a woman. And I could do that, what she did. I could kill my bloody children; I'd enjoy that. She was desperate - too right. I'm not that desperate, but I think about it sometimes, when they get on my nerves and if he's playing up Well her chap played her

up proper - Old Jason. Yeah, he was a right bad lad. And she knew. And she decided.... And if they're all getting me down I think about my knife drawer. I count up the blades: serrated bread knife, meat cleaver. That steel carver with the bone handle. The old ones sharpen up best. Yeah she had intent - Old Medea. She had.... she had.... but...but I...but....Ibut I haven't. I'd just be pretending. Lying again. Pretending to pretend. But to be honest.... which I know is a contradiction in terms with me...but sometimes...I just feel...you can stick your cyberculture, your ontological insecurity, I just want...I just wish...sometimes...all the time actually...I do...just... Well I do **miss Medea!**

I'm sorry about the tears, it's unlike me, but a rounded character must have its moments of doubt, cannot be without complexity or emotion. And I do, well, just then anyway.... I did feel...something. Psychology? Oh I wouldn't go so far as that. I couldn't generalise. The vagaries of my personality are more...well personal. More self-centred. Yes, that's me, just self, self, self. I admit it, I am selfish. Well, it's inevitable. After all...there's only me, I'm the only one here, up here, getting looked at. I mean if someone else was with me, well, it'd be different. I wouldn't be so lonely for one thing. I wouldn't feel such a complete failure, so hurt and wounded. I am you know. I'm a tragically scarred figure. Lonely, confused, damaged by deceit. How can you laugh? I mean, what do you think this is? Oh, I wish I could escape.... from myself, from this body.....from this form... this formula.

Formula? Form - ula. Ula, ula? Sounds like part of my body, an intimate part. The ula.... just down from the ova. Hot, engorged and covered in feathers. Feathers for flying. Flying! Oh yes! Why did I give up flying? What for? For this misery? Not likely. I'd rather be battered by the winds of fate. I have wings. So I can fly away. I can escape, I must, you must help me. I just need a little lift, some audience participation. I mean why use wires when you can help? You want to? Well thank you. I'll come down and.... now.... now just stand perfectly still and perhaps bend your knees? Good, good. Then I can get up on your.... mind the wings.... don't damage the...careful! Up, higher, that's it, that's right. Now..... let go. Let me fly! Wheeeeeeeeeeeeeeee! Ow!

See that? Did you see that? Yes well.... so much for... I should have known, I mean, I mean we're talking flying here, we're talking lift off, I mean, if weight ratio came into it a swan would never get off the ground and as for a pigeon....

But they do - they do fly. Don't they? Don't they? We've all seen them haven't we - up there - suspended, despite our disbelief. We've seen them flying, haven't we?

Did you say yes? Oh praise the lottery! God bless supermarkets and all who shop in them! I feel light hearted again, more airy, more fit for flight. If I just open my wings again like this and stick in the feather you so kindly returned, I feel I might be able to, of my own volition, fly in the face of truth. Yes here I go, here I go..... up into the ether. Here I am spreading my wings

and sallying forth against all reason. Like a will-o-the-wisp, like a shadow against the light. Because you know, deceit is so delicious, pretence is pure pleasure. Lies are - oh just loll out your tongue and lick up those lies. Come with me, believe me, believe in me, I know you do. I can feel you do. Oh yes, this is it, this is the moment, this is the place. Who needs a storyline, or an object? There is no crock of gold at the end of the rainbow, only me and yes, yes; it's true that.... if you truly, truly believe in me then I can. I will.... look I am flying!

Appendix Four

Content

Orpheus, Eurydice, Hermes

Rainer Maria Rilke (translated Leishman, 1945, pp30-33)

Orpheus. Eurydice. Hermes

That was the strange unfathomed mine of souls.
And they, like silent veins of silver ore,
were winding through its darkness. Between roots
welled up the blood that flows on to mankind,
like blocks of heavy porphyry in the darkness.
Else there was nothing red.

But there were rocks
and ghostly forests. Bridges over voidness
and that immense, grey, unreflecting pool
that hung above its so far distant bed
like a grey rainy sky above a landscape.
And between meadows, soft and full of patience,
appeared the pale strip of the single pathway
like a long line of linen laid to bleach.

And on this single pathway they approached.

The slender husband first, in his blue mantle,
gazing in dumb impatience straight before him.
His steps devoured the way in mighty chunks
they did not pause to chew; his hands were hanging,
heavy and clenched, out of the falling folds,
no longer conscious of the lightsome lyre,
the lyre which had grown into his left
like twines of rose into a branch of olive.
It seemed as though his senses were divided:
for, while his sight ran like a dog before him,
turned round, came back, and stood, time and again,
distant and waiting, at the path's next turn,
his hearing lagged behind him like a smell.
It seemed to him at times as though it stretched
back to the progress of those other two
who should be following up this whole ascent.
Then once more there was nothing else behind him
but his climb's echo and his mantle's wind.
He, though, assured himself they were still coming;
said it aloud and heard it die away.
They still were coming, only they were two
that trod with fearful lightness. If he durst
but once look back (if only looking back
were not undoing of this whole enterprise

still to be done), he could not fail to see them,
the two light-footers, following him in silence:
The god of faring and of distant message,
the travelling-hood over his shining eyes,
the slender wand held out before his body,
the wings around his ankles lightly beating,
and in his left hand, as entrusted, *she*.

She, so belov'd, that from a single lyre
more mourning rose than from all women-mourners,
- that a whole world of mourning rose, wherein
all things were once more present: wood and vale
and road and hamlet, field and stream and beast,
-and that around this world of mourning rose, wherein
All things were once more present: wood and vale
and road and hamlet, field and stream and beast,
-and that around this world of mourning turned,
even as around the other earth, a sun
and a whole silent heaven full of stars,
a heaven of mourning with disfigured stars:
-she, so beloved.

But hand in hand now with that god she walked,
her steps, encircled by the clinging grave-clothes,
uncertain, gentle, and without impatience.
Wrapt in herself, like one whose time is near,
she thought not of the husband going before them,
nor of the road ascending into life.
Wrapt in herself she wandered. And her deadness
was filling her like fullness.
Full as a fruit with sweetness and with darkness
was she with her great death, which was so new
that for the time she could take nothing in.

She had attained a new virginity
and was intangible; her sex had closed
like a young flower at the approach of evening,
and her pale hands had grown so disaccustomed
to being a wife, that even the slim god's
endlessly gentle contact as he led her
disturbed her like a too great intimacy.

Even now she was no longer that fair woman
who'd sometimes echoed in the poet's poems,

no longer the broad couch's scent and island,
and yonder man's possession any longer.
She was already loosened like long hair,
and given far and wide like fallen rain,
and dealt out like a manifold supply.

She was mere root.
And when abruptly swift,
the god laid hold of her, and, with an anguished
cry, uttered the words: He has turned round!
she took in nothing, and said softly: Who?

But in the distance, dark in the bright exit,
someone or other stood, whose countenance
was indistinguishable. Stood and saw
how, on a strip of pathway between meadows,
with sorrow in his look, the god of message
silently turned to follow one already
going back again along that self-same pathway,
her steps encircled by the clinging grave-clothes,
uncertain, gentle, and without impatience.

Rainer Maria Rilke (translated Leishman, 1945, pP30-33)

Appendix Five

Content

Script for digital film *Bodywork*.

DVD – 18 minutes approx. black and white

Bodywork (2002)

bodywork

we had breakfast
our breakfast
you know the one we always had

then he was going.....except.....his car keys

he couldn't find them

I didn't look
he looked
after I thought I could have looked
I could have hidden them
but I didn't so he went

and he did it
he drove to that place and did it

when I came back the house smelt different,
but it sounded the same

and I?.....had to have a plan

my plan was to organize time so I could live again

at first it was small things - cleaning, washing up

then

I was working my body
it was early days.....early bodywork
before the real bodywork

on the fifth day I started the real bodywork
breathing exercises - breathe in, breathe out

it was helping me to live
to live even though the world was lost inside me

I worked my body hard
and gradually, over the days, I built it up

there were always states to reach that surpassed previous extremes
I measured the unendurable by breath
or strength
or length of time
or force of will
then I extended the limit

my bodywork made everything transparent

I began to work naked in a cold room
mouth open in astonishment
eyes shut tight against the intensity of passing awareness
against being alone

one morning I heard a noise
it sounded..... the same.....as if.....
as if he.....the same sound he.....

it was time to sand my body
I used a pumice stone on the bottoms of my feet
I worked on a small callous, stretching the task over days, lost in it
I had emery boards and files, scissors, clippers and creams
I wax-stripped hair from my armpits and legs
it came ripping off in hot sizzles
I had an acid exfoliating cream, hard-core
and after I stripped the hair
I rubbed in the cream to remove wastepapery skin in flakes
- the cell death of something inside me
I used a monkey-hair brush on my elbows and knees
I wanted it to hurt

I wanted to disappear
to become blankness

a body slate erased of every past resemblance

but where are you going?

just into town

but there's nothing we need

just for a while

I'll take the Toyota,

if I ever find my keys...

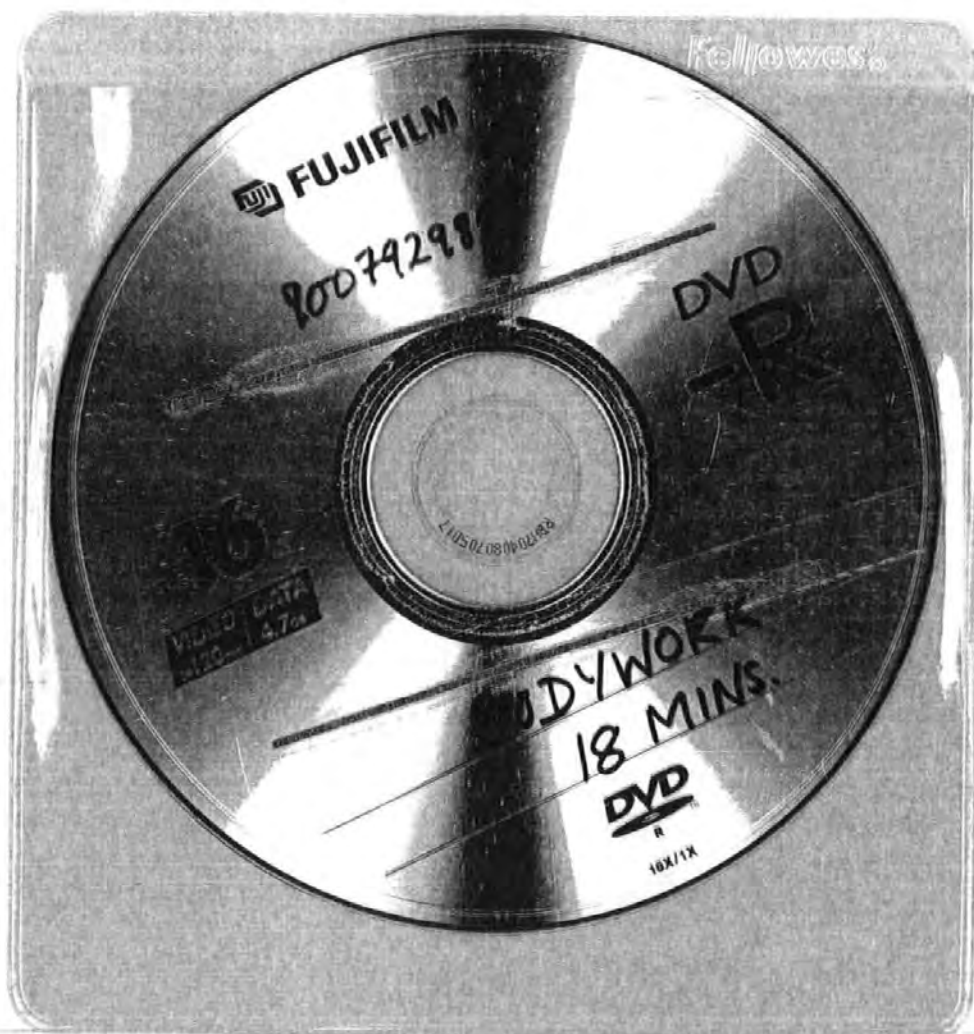
but they're in the carof course.... the keys

in the car....where else?

time is the only narrative that matters it stretches events
and makes it possible for us to suffer and come out of it and
see death happen and come out of it

BODYWORK

digital film, black and white, length: approximately 18 minutes



**CAUTION –
DO NOT USE
DAMAGED CDs**

If you install this disk
**you must delete the programme
from your computer**
before you return the book.
Failure to do this is an infringement
of copyright and you may be
liable to prosecution

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