The Confessional Novel in South Africa: A Study of J M Coetzee's *Age of Iron* (1990) and Menán du Plessis' *A State of Fear* (1983)

by

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DECLARATION

This study represents original work by the author and has not been submitted in any form to another university. Where use was made of the work of others it has been duly acknowledged in the text.

D. A. Robinson

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INTRODUCTION

White writing in South Africa in the years from 1976 to the lifting of the Emergency in 1990 manifests "a painful preoccupation with Self and its problematic relation to external reality" (Jacobs 1989:34). The "implosion" of sensibility is centred on and by the guilt experienced as a consequence of division between the private and public where, as Ndebele proposes, white writers "are beneficiaries of apartheid even as their consciences condemn it" (1992:36). This complicity of knowledge with power is for Gordimer the nexus of the apparently irreconcilable "absolutes" of outer and inner reality, of "the morality of life and the morality of art" (1988:232), the reconciliation of which is the "essential gesture" of the white writer negotiating the interregnum and desirous of being accountable to the "new order". Clingman writes that the "present" in the fiction of the 1980's is "a way of engaging" with possibilities perceived to be emerging from the future (1990:54). In this way the revisionary process is a "redefinition", as Brink sees it, of the text as a dialectic in which the reader and writer meet to consider a changing world (1991:116). Attwell's position takes the resources of postmodernism "as enabling rather than undermining an historical engagement" (1990:96), thereby pointing to the transformative power at work in the act of writing and reading in a text which privileges processes over the closure of ideological "recognition" that is definitive of realism (1990:97). The "self-scrutiny" and "discourse with the self" that Jacobs (1989) examines, positions the white writer as the observer observed, seeking release from the very construct s/he is complicit with. This may be read as seeking ethical justification through the political act of writing, since the question of how to act is one which informs the position of the liberal humanist in South Africa. It is a moral or ethical question; for Elizabeth Curren, narrator of J.M. Coetzee's *Age of Iron*, 'how to act' has been a shameful matter "of getting over the worse" which "[f]or the sake of my own resurrection I cannot get over ... this time" (1990:115). Anna Rossouw, narrator of Menán du Plessis' *A State of Fear*, writes that she finds it impossible to accept Memmi's precept that "those among the colonisers who dissent will inevitably find themselves in one of history's curious impasses" (1983:4), but also feels "stupefied by [her] own ignorance" (1983:159). The form their redemption takes is their self-writing, through which each attends to the process of

revision. That Elizabeth Curren defines redemption as her need "to sell [her]self" (1990:107), announces her position as a liberal humanist who fears a short-circuiting of truth through the discourses that are available to her. Her position may be said to be paradigmatic of that of Anna Rossouw, (and the narrators of Menán du Plessis' later work, *Longlive!* (1989)), all of whom are complicit with and critical of the discourse of liberal humanism as it manifests itself in the conflict between self and other.

Whether reconciliation between the private and public is possible is a question van Wyk Smith sees as problematised in South African postmodernist writing of the 1980's, which raises "constructive misgivings" about the individual's and the society's ability "to get its story right" (1991:94). The propositional and provisional nature of discourse and history alike, place the writer and the reader in "an enlightening discourse of profound doubt" (1991:93) as a means to signification. This is particularly evident in the fictional and confessional autobiographies written in the 1980's, as van Wyk Smith contends, which manifest a shift from fear of nemesis to a questioning of "the relationship between self, world and text" (1991:92). This is a process of revision in which the "unsettled subject" (Foster 1987:3) of confessional writing unsettles the reader, and renders the reader complicit in the search for truth. The reader functions as a confessor to the "confessant" or narrator, J.M. Coetzee's term of distinction between the two (1992:263). The primary texts for this dissertation: Menán du Plessis' *A State of Fear* (1983), and J.M. Coetzee's *Age of Iron* (1990), are confessional narratives which problematise not only self-knowledge and truth, but the positions both of the narrator-other and reader, each of which is relativised by the historical and political referent. What Ihab Hassan says on postmodernism has much the same bearing on the argument proposed on confessional writing, which is that the indeterminacies in being complicit with and critical of the (political) referent are part of "a vast, revisionary will in the Western world, unsettling and resettling codes, canons, procedures and beliefs" (Hutcheon 1989:18). The act of writing and the act of reading are thus implicated in the revision and re-vision of the private and public.

Confessional writing is a discursive practice in which the writer or narrator accepts the position of self as a transgressor in search of truth. It is a distinct mode within self-writing in which the self is prepared to reveal shame and self-doubt as reasons for

suffering, and is prepared to acknowledge the need for redemption. Olney (1980:13) and Friedman (1988:56) have written that religious confession of the Christian tradition was an autobiographical act from which self-writing as a literary mode emerged. The reconstruction of self in relation to others in secular confessional writing can be seen to be reconfigured from the self in relation to God in religious confession. The self (in both practices) is a social construct where "discourses intersect" as Nussbaum puts it, for which reason the self is a site of contradiction, and subject to constant revision (1988:150). In confessional writing, the self is examined before the perceived dominant of the Other, and the imagined judgement of self that this occasions is experienced as anxiety and guilt, and as a desire to redeem the self. In the search for truth the repentant self is constrained to deal with the contending desires for self-revision and self-justification. This division problematises the possibility of a transcendent truth, and the possible reconciliation of the private and public. The need to justify the self is shameful in so far as the self places the blame for contradiction and disruption on an Other. The desire for self-revision on the other hand can be seen as metonymic of the desire for what Axthelm calls "a reconstructed social order" (1967:98) in which the private and public are reconciled.

Confessional writing is a symbolic refusal of death, a refusal to renounce life. Through its placing of the *self* as a transgressor in need of redemption, as a mode it militates against the "political romanticism" that Elizabeth Wilson warns against (in the movements of feminism). Wilson defines political romanticism as "the longing for utopias and reconstructed selves", which can give way to a "left-wing melancholy" about the "inescapable awfulness of the society of the spectacle" (1986:183). Ndebele, in a seminal paper on the spectacular, in which he envisions a "rediscovery of the ordinary" in South African writing, points to the "manifest display of violence and brutality" in this country (1986:143) as the reason for the convention of the spectacular in Black writing. He proposes that the consolidation of the group against oppression does not permit the individual "inner dialogue with the self, [or] a social public dialogue" (1986:150) and that the oppressed group is written into a dialectic of the heroic. This has much the same bearing on the argument Wilson proposes, since the binarism of any power group will have the effect of othering and of foreclosing the examination of weakness and limitations within and by the ex-centric group. The choice to construct

utopias is a way of dealing with what appears to be an inescapable reality. Hutcheon defines the spectacle as the effect of 'othering' through representation (1988:207). The spectacular has been an (unconscious) device foregrounded in both black and white writing as a means to vivify the question of how to act within the "bizarre structuralism" (van Wyk Smith 1991:93) of South African history. Confessional writing, like the revisionist postmodernist writing, refuses the supposition that the spectacle is inescapable, and evidences the desire of the narrating "I" to transcend and to preserve the self. Furthermore, confessional writing understands the reconstruction of the self and the social order as a process of constant revision and it thus opposes the mythic and fixed propensities of utopias.

I have chosen to examine the confessional, self-reflexive narratives of Menán du Plessis' *A State of Fear* (1983), and J.M. Coetzee's *Age of Iron* (1990), a pre-Emergency and a late Emergency work. Both writers endorse storytelling as a mode which rivals history: writing is seen to issue in its own conclusions, and history is seen as a form of discourse open to revision. Storytelling is thus a transformative and reconstructive act, and is considered by both writers as a means to re-enter history. Menán du Plessis won the Sanlam Literary Award and the Olive Schreiner Prize for this, her first published work. J.M. Coetzee is one of 65 honorary fellows of the Modern Language Association; he has been the recipient of the Booker Prize, the Geoffrey Faber Memorial Prize, the James Tait Black Memorial Prize, the Jerusalem Prize, and the premier South African literary award, the CNA prize (3 times).

Both Anna Rossouw, narrator of *A State of Fear* (1983) and Elizabeth Curren, narrator of *Age of Iron* (1990), adopt the epistolary form for their confessional self-writing, as a means to examine their perceived failings and their misgivings of what constitutes truth and accountable action. Because the epistolary form is processive, a narrative-in-search-of-truth, it becomes a trope for the way in which the confessant repositions herself in history, as she revises the discourses that have written her in answer to the social and political realities she faces.

The desire to narrate the self arises from a need to transcend self-doubt and loss through their representation in language. It is through the other, to whom the

extended letters are addressed, that the self is able to objectify itself as a construct open to revision and change.

The desire to narrate the self is a matter of urgency for both Anna Rossouw and Elizabeth Curren: faced with the increasing militancy of *children* in the struggle for black liberation, and with the increasingly callous State reprisals and repression, each must question her complicity in the discourse of injustice, and the place of liberal humanism in a violent South Africa. Elizabeth Curren excoriates what she sees as the interested self-preservation of both black and Afrikaner nationalisms; Anna fears that any social ethos (including liberal humanism) institutes itself through a "communion of violence" (1983:166). *A State of Fear* is pre-Emergency, and its young narrator is uncertain of *how* to face her historical condition; *Age of Iron* is written in the late Emergency and the narrator is an ageing woman dying of cancer, certain in her deepest being that the way forward for this country lies in reciprocity. Where Anna Rossouw tentatively proffers a dialectic of love between parent and child as the "check" to both revolutionary and romantic idealisms, Elizabeth Curren establishes the primacy of parental love and censure as the basis of reciprocal relationships. Each in her own way believes that principles placed before love undo the process of true signification.

Anna Rossouw and Elizabeth Curren are teachers; both write their confessional letters in the bitter cold and wet of one, or part of one, Cape winter. The domicile of each is invaded by a 'stranger' or 'strangers'. Each is compelled to write, in an attempt to hold (meta)physical dissolution at bay. Each inscribes herself knowingly into the revisionary process in the desire both for personal salvation and for social reconstruction.

* * *

In Chapter One of this dissertation, I examine the theory and history of confessional writing. Chapter Two is my study of Menán du Plessis' *A State of Fear*. In Chapter Three I consider J.M. Coetzee's *Age of Iron*. This is followed by a short conclusion.

CHAPTER ONE: Confessional Writing

1.1 The Place of Confessional Writing in Contemporary Fiction

Of the position of the novel in South Africa J.M. Coetzee has said: "When the choice is no longer limited to *either* looking on in horrified fascination as the blows fall *or* turning one's eyes away, then the novel can once again take as its province the whole of life" (1992:368). It is my contention in this dissertation that confessional writing takes as its province the whole of life, if by life we are to understand the "unflinchingness" and "forgivingness" of the self regarding its historical position (to use J.M. Coetzee's terms (1992:29)). The subject as a site of struggle confronts the self-evasion inherent in the positions both of horrified fascination and of turning away, and inscribes in the place of evasion a self-reflexive position through which to attempt signification. Self-knowledge as a process is mediated through doubt and self-doubt, which disclose the need for revision and re-vision. The search for truth manifests in the desire to account for the self, and to reconcile self with other in what is understood as an ontological rather than an epistemological paradigm.

Confessional writing as a mode in which the self is constructed in its relation to others is a dialogic act in which attempts to account for the self are facilitated through dialogue with the other. Hutcheon points to the role of the other in mediating the sense of self (1989:40), and Foster writes of the speaker who seeks meaning through the speech of others. In this context of alterity, confession is "an attempt to objectify the self" (Foster 1987:10) so that the desire to be thought well of - to construct a self that one can live with - does not lead to self-deception. In "Confession and Double Thoughts" Coetzee proposes that without self-doubt "[the] confession reveals nothing so much as the helplessness of confession before the desire of the self to construct its own truth" (1992:279). The desire of the self to construct its own truth in answer to its own needs opposes the desire for self-revision. In this way the confessant, as distinct from the confessor through and perhaps to whom the confession is directed, paradoxically resists the closure of codified truth while in search of closure as reconciliation. This dialectic is evident in the form religious confession takes, which is "a sequence of transgression, confession, penitence and absolution, and absolution means the end of the episode..." (Coetzee 1992:251-252). Secular confession, in the absence of divine absolution, issues from the confessant's desire for an appropriate role in society, as Beckett puts it "wanting to know what to do, and... wanting to be able to do it" (Foster 1987:126).

1.2 Confessional Writing as a Distinct Mode of Self-Writing

The mode of confessional writing is distinct from autobiography, memoirs, testimonial literature, the apology and "confessional" fiction, which do not render the reader complicit in the search for truth, and which are not premised on the desire to justify the self. Autobiography, as will be shown, celebrates a self that is reconciled with the Other. The memoir is a partial biography of a stage of life. The testimonial document, as Gititi formulates it, emerges from oppressed groups - *testimonios* is the South American Spanish for feminist writings. It is a representative text "giving evidence, bearing witness, writing (auto)biography, paying homage, etc, for a 'we'", and it uses popular tradition to draw certain tropes for the purpose of collective endorsement (1991:48). "Confessional" fiction represents a sensational confession of "abhorrent acts" designed to excite the reader (Coetzee 1992:252). The apology is an ancient form of public self-defence in response to accusation. Nussbaum points to the use of the apology by certain eighteenth century women autobiographers who desire to be vindicated from blame, often for their fall from chastity. Nussbaum proposes that the apology does not question the moral and social system, but "attempts to escape it" (1988:152). Of all these forms it is only in confessional writing or the confessional mode that the writer/narrator is concerned to redeem the self through the revision and reconstitution of ethical paradigms. This may mean to confirm, or to revise and modify the "boundaries of violated law", in Ricoeur's words (Foster 1987:16), as the revised self apprehends it.

In autobiographical writing the *autos* of the narrating "I" asserts control over the *bios* through the act of constructing a verifiable self that is reconciled with the public (self). The *autos* of the narrating "I" in confessional writing (whether verifiable or fictional) doubts the vindication of any such construct. In other words, the autobiographer defends the *graphe* as "the song of a man who has come through". We see this in much South African autobiographical writing: Sindiwe Magona's *To My Children's Children* (1990), Peter Abraham's *Tell Freedom* (1954), Noni Jabavu's *The Ochre People* (1963), Mary Benson's *A Far Cry* (1990), Ellen Kuzwayo's *Call Me Woman* (1985), Ezekiel Mphahlele's *Down Second Avenue* (1959), Emma Mashinini's *Strikes Have Followed Me All My Life* (1989), Alan Paton's *Towards the Mountain* (1980). The confessant on the other hand is an unsettled subject who fears incompleteness, and his/her narrative, occasioned by misgivings of what constitutes a proper role in society, foregrounds the indeterminacies and provisionalities of the processes of signification. The confessional autobiographies, Breyten Breytenbach's *The True Confessions of an Albino Terrorist* (1984) and Bloke Modisane's *Blame Me on History* (1963), evidence the suffering of the alienated self: in the *attempt* at self-reconstruction of Modisane and the *process* of self-reconstruction in Breytenbach. Confession in fictional autobiographies, J.M. Coetzee's

In the Heart of the Country (1978) and Etienne van Heerden's *Ancestral Voices (Toorberg)* (1989,1986), and in confessional fictional autobiographies, John Conyngham's *The Arrowing of the Cane* (1986), Karel Schoeman's *Afskeid en Vertrek* (1990), Nadine Gordimer's *My Son's Story* (1990) and the primary texts for this dissertation, Menán du Plessis' *A State of Fear* (1983) and J.M. Coetzee's *Age of Iron* (1990), manifests a desire to justify the self. However self-reflexive their positions, the process of self-reconstruction occurs at the interface with a dominant Other.

1.3 Confessional Narrative

1.3.1 Religious Confession

Confession in Judaic and Christian observances is the acknowledgement of personal and collective transgression as the rite of passage toward reconciliation with God. The confessant trusts to divine forgiveness of error and to the private desire for a reconstituted self and world. The observance concerns a doctrine of mercy coterminous with a doctrine of accountable action. Gusdorf speaks of Christianity as a new spiritual orientation toward the mysteries of an interior life, in which "intentions weigh as heavily as acts" (1980:33). In Christian doctrine the confessant as a repentant sinner is absolved of transgression through the intervention of Christ. The bearing this has on confession made within and outside religious constraints is clear in the foregrounding of suffering as necessary to reconciliation. Atonement in Christian theology, as the reconciliation of God and Self, is founded on the incarnation and death of a suffering Christ. That man achieves knowledge of God or his god/s through suffering is a concept Trilling attributes to high religion as early as Aeschylus (c 500 BC), and it was from the beginning an important principle of Christianity (1983:107). In this tradition suffering is the affirmation of meaning in life, since it is through suffering that the self desires to reinscribe the perfect good lost to the "fallen world". In this light the hero in the secular confession of Bellow's *Herzog* recognises that his confession has been an effort to maintain an awareness of suffering in order to keep meaning in his life and in the world (Axthelm 1967:169).

1.3.2 From Religious to Secular Self-Writing

Wright points to conversion as the key to most religious autobiographies both in its confessional and inspirational form. This is evident in the writings of Augustine in the fourth century, through medieval mystics such as Margery Kempe, and Calvinist soul-searchers such as Bunyan, to the Victorian Newman in the nineteenth century

(1988:94), by which time the novel had become the dominant literary form, the story a means of making sense of the self and of the world (1988:11). For Newman (and new man) the religious autobiography was a means of exploring the moral precept, in his words, that "here below to live is to change, and to be perfect is to have changed often" (Olney 1980:242).

The confessional form as we know it has its beginnings in religious autobiography and Augustine is seen to have initiated the genre in his *Confessions*. In "Religious Autobiography: Writing God and the Self" (1988), Wright shows how Augustine drew on earlier literary traditions of classical meditation and rhetoric to address his own meditations to God. His autobiography is a commentary on the Bible as a means to answering theological questions, a confession of his incontinent life before his conversion, and an account of his conversion, itself reliant on earlier conversion-narratives which involved personal appropriation of Biblical texts. Wright quotes Augustine as probing his own motives for confession, and infers that it is not the reader's curiosity that Augustine desires to gratify, but that the motive *is* his avowed desire to inspire his readers to conversion. For Augustine, God is the "higher signifier" (in Wright's terms) that cannot become signified, and this proposes a doctrine of mystery beyond the constraints of "a limited self-understanding" (1988:98). In his own words, Augustine questions his conception of God as "a fiction" and abandons this construct in turning his gaze inward, no longer "looking for God outside [the] self" but finding "the God of [his] own heart" (in Wright 1988:99). As I will later show, this is the position avowed by Tolstoy, for whom truth is founded on "an inner impulse" or "an impulse toward God" (J.M. Coetzee 1992:261).

Axthelm problematises the conversion of Augustine as "a religious solution" made possible through "self-imposed limitation" (1967:3,4). As a Christian theologian, his "limitation" takes the form of a perceived call to justify his God against the apprehension of existential dissolution. It can be argued that dissolution for Augustine is subsumed into the symbolic order, or the law of [God] the Father. From this formulation, the opposing voices of self-doubt are contained by the monologic law of the Christian Father, and do not displace the authorial position of the Absolute. As a counterpoint to this scriptural authority, Axthelm refers to the Book of Job in its inconclusive positioning of man in the question of justice: Job's blessings are returned to him doublefold but those same blessings were taken from him despite his righteousness. The difficulties which Job encounters and which he opposes are *not* resolved by the scriptures (1967:4), hence the Book's evidence of a precursive existential doubt.

Axthelm proposes that the divisive conflict of consciousness cannot be contained by Christian theology, and it becomes the "modern challenge to confession" (1967:3).

Wright conversely argues that Christian theology is founded on the principle that a person's understanding of God is interwoven with his self-understanding (1988:98). Confessional writing is arguably an interaction of these opposing discourses.

The Reformation in its questioning of the absolution granted by a confessor, placed the sinner in a private reckoning of what constitutes accountability. The public rite of confession became a private dialogising of the nature of truth, of justice, of the position of the religious person within political and social constraints (Axthelm 1967:7). Nussbaum (1988) points to the period before the Enlightenment as encouraging private self-reflexive writing. The ascendent self in Protestantism was conscious of individual identity, and Nonconformist sects inspired the importance of the self in its "differentness from others". The Dissenting groups of Quakers, Methodists and Baptists encouraged conversion narratives from their members, which like the Puritan oral conversion narratives of the seventeenth century, were subject to the consensual body of the Church (1988:153). Hence with the interest in and publication of journals in the eighteenth century came the restitution of the confessional text to public discourse.

Marcus holds that for women, spiritual autobiography has been "an acceptable script in Western culture" (1988:120), premised as it is on the assertion of moral paradigms within the hegemonic institutions of the Church, the state and the patriarchy. Nussbaum writes that of women's self-writing in the eighteenth century, spiritual autobiographies in particular show the writer's attempts to find a coherent subject position, in part because of the perceived importance of a consistent public character. This is explored through the writer's colluding with the ideology of (female) gender, challenging it with alternative discourses, or disrupting that ideology by disguising herself as a male. In the absence of a female "self" from theological formulations of identity, and in her increasing relegation to the private life, the eighteenth century woman used diaries to construct a self, and this in part effected the transition to secular writing (Nussbaum 1988:155-156).

As Nussbaum holds, journals other than spiritual writings were private documents written in response to the transference of divine authority to the secular and personal realm, when the self was in the uncertain position of independence from authoritative explanations. Hence the self-writing of the eighteenth century was based on a narrative of actual events, "discovering and inventing the self in relation to other people and to God" (Wright 1988:114), and on a questioning of authority and autonomy in "the crisis of transition from spiritual to secular understandings" (Nussbaum 1988:154).

1.3.3 Secular Confessional Writing

The epiphanic moment gave conversion narratives the structure of a beginning and an end, in which the "darkness of doubt", to use Augustine's term (Wright 1988:96) was resolved by divine revelation and absolution. In secular confessional writing this closure gives way to process and the non-closure of uncertainty. In Ricoeur's formulation, "answers" are probably "unseasonal" and "premature", and this occasions further interpretation (Foster 1987:16). It is Ricoeur's contention, as Foster puts it, that "all action in a fallen world is misdirected, perverted [and] requires interpretation" (Foster 1987:15). As a premise for this dissertation, (re)interpretation is an interactive process between the discourses available to both the writer/narrator and reader. In confessional writing, the revision of truth attends the revision of self.

The critical ideal of self-writing as Jelinek sees it, is "a genre of disclosure". But she sees the "mostly nonconfessional actuality" at variance with the avowed process of revealing the self (Myers 1988:193). Confessional writing is therefore a distinct mode within self-writing in which the self is a transgressor (in the secular understanding of sinner), prepared to disclose shame and self-doubt as reasons for suffering, and prepared to acknowledge the need to redeem the self. The dictum that the sinner is at the heart of Christianity, can be understood in its secular revision as the discomfort inherent in the ontological experience of division between the private and the public. In both discourses, the self desires reconciliation: in a position of guilt, the confessant suffers disjuncture between self and God in religious terms, and between self and other in secular terms. In the face of a perceived absence of divine absolution in the modern secular world, the self desires reconciliation with the other.

The state of grace attendant on divine absolution can arguably be reconfigured as a sense of place in the secular world, a role imaginatively conferred on the self who is reconciled with the other. In a state of separation from the other, the self suffers exclusion from a desired "place" in the collective, in other words from an assumed body of "shared truths (embodied by language) larger than ourselves" (Mandel 1980:69). Confession, as a process of self-examination through which to recover a sense of place, is prefaced by an anxiety to justify the self. In autobiography, the narrating "I" examines, in the words of the activist-minister in Menán du Plessis' later work *Longlive!* "the reasons why we celebrate even as we mourn" (1989:188). The confessant conversely is conscious of his/her separation from the collective; and the insistent first-person dialogising of the reasons for the loss of the celebratory foregrounds suffering and the desire for reconciliation.

The Other has been variously defined in terms of the repressed oppositional voice, the reason for conflict within the self, perhaps because, as Gusdorf proposes, the self desires "to embrace ... the always secret but never refused sense of his own destiny" (1980:47). Freud positions the other in the unconscious, and Lacan places the other in the (pre-Symbolic) Imaginary - both terms mean a language outside and beyond the constraint of rules. Lacan further posits "aggressivity ... in any relation to the other [not self]" because of the speaker's desire to appropriate the other to complement his/her own being (Foster 1987:126). Kristeva sees the other as the semiotic *chora*, the heterogeneity of which precedes specularisation, and which remains the disruptive dimension of language in the symbolic order (Moi 1985:161-162). Kristeva's semiotic is "the unspoken of a stable speaking position", as Gross formulates it (1990:87). For Jameson the other is the political unconscious, a collective repression that exists in troubled relation to ideology and which can be "co-opted" by hegemonic constructs (Dowling 1984:126). McHale refers to the other as the collective fiction of reality which the self mediates through language and accepts as "the" reality, and poses his own terms for the other as the "paramount" or shared reality the self returns to from the multiple private realities such as dreaming and play and fiction (1986:37). And in the South African context of the monologic political referent of Apartheid, the other is the excluded powerless majority, as Ndebele defines it, "the real centre of white writing" (1992:36).

1.4 Theorists on Confessional Writing

1.4.1 *Stephen Spender* in "Confession and Autobiography" (1980,1962), positions the autobiographer and confessant as the observer self-observed, mediating self-knowledge through only one of "two selves", the conscious self the arbiter of the unconscious self. He proposes that the desire to belong, to be part of a whole, occasions an objectifying of the self through which the isolated self is restored to the community or creed s/he desires to be part of. Whether the sense of belonging is conferred through forgiveness or through condemnation, the self is conceivably no longer alone (120). Mandel contends that in autobiographical writing the desire to belong allows the self to recognise its "subordination and obligation to shared truths... larger than ourselves" (1980:69). Spender conversely questions the assumption of a "truth" because the desire to belong presupposes restraint and even repression of the "inner life" which is feared as dangerous. Spender is further chary of what constitutes an "adequate confessor" since belief in absolution would problematise and even misprise truths larger than ourselves, given that absolution excuses the self of its error. He believes that Augustine's sins are transformed by their avowal of and witness to God's mercy. His understanding of Rousseau on the other hand, lies in the misprision of the would-be

confessant who attempts to make others condone his errors in the belief that his sins are no different from their own. Spender disavows the grace of such "democratization" (121). His view is endorsed by later theorists such as Wright (1988) who contends that Rousseau begins by addressing God, but his confessions soon become a means of "self-justification" (106), and by Coetzee who (as will be shown later) points to Rousseau's "truth" as an excuse for a lack of self-reflexivity (1992:266). Spender concludes his essay uncertain of the "truths" arrived at in autobiographical and confessional writing, contending that in constructing a self rather than two selves, the inner life is effectively silenced (122).

1.4.2 In his book *The Modern Confessional Novel* (1967) *Peter Axthelm* examines the existential dilemma facing the modern hero who (must) seek self-understanding without the help of revelation (3). It is his contention that the ultimate possibility for the modern confessional hero is a perception founded upon an understanding of past and present self in which the self is perceived "in relation to nothing and, at the same time, to everything" (129). In other words, the modern hero resists the relational order, in which the self is understood only in relation to something external to itself. External realities may be defined as the Other: an oppressed other; a community of guilt; traditions; God. Axthelm argues that in place of dependence on something outside the self through which to mediate self-knowledge, the modern hero is prepared to dialogise "the dark and hidden forces within the ... self" (164) as a means to reconstruction. The desire to find meaning within the self foregrounds the rebuilding process rather than the process of dissolution and disintegration. Axthelm proposes that the desire for a reconstructed order leads the writer to the confessional form, in which self-knowledge militates against a lack of resolution or absolution, in favour of an understanding of "motives" (52).

Axthelm sees the modern confessional hero to have his beginnings in Dostoevsky's Underground Man, so named because the hero is taken underground where the light of revelation cannot enter, and must there seek meaning within his own being (5). Foster contends that "inner meaning" is the "truth" that existential man creates for himself (1987:108). In abandoning his efforts to defend his actions, the Underground Man then confronts his actions in a series of recalled episodes, as Axthelm says, (1967:14), but his darker visions fail to ease his existential pain (129).

Axthelm's research then moves to the "Disintegrated World: Gide, Sartre and Camus"; through "The Search for a Reconstructed Order: Koestler and Golding"; and is concluded with his study of Bellow's *Herzog*. Herzog is the ultimate hero who makes the decision himself to stop his confession (129), overcome, in his own words, by

"a deep eagerness to begin" (174). Axthelm writes that the narrative leaves no sense that more should be said; the hero is "no longer challenged to know, he hastens forward to begin" (177). The modern confession in Axthelm's work is thus conceived of as close to the "hopeful vision" which is a means of "rebuilding [the] world around a clearly perceived sense of the self" (179). For Axthelm, a sense of self is founded upon an understanding of one's own motives, rather than upon a specious relational order.

1.4.3 In his book *Confession and Complicity in Narrative* (1987), which deals with confessional narratives by Augustine, Kierkegaard, James, Hawthorne, Faulkner and Beckett, *Dennis Foster* is concerned with the "mastery of meaning" as a motive which informs both the desire to confess and the desire to read confessional narrative, and which must be "refused" as specious by both narrator and reader. If the reader positions the narrator as the one who knows "how [he] is placed in the world" (135), the reader elevates the arbitrary experience within any particular confession to a transcendent or mythic order (135). And, as J.M. Coetzee points out, "[m]yths are ways of patching things together" (1992:119). If the narrator or writer desires that his/her work "equal the self", in other words, that s/he control "the constitutive forms of reality" (127), the confession will pose as a discourse of truth when in fact it is a discourse of power (134). Both reader and writer become complicit in the search for truth as it is constructed in the narrative. Foster proposes that the desire to know is a response which "depends on another who seems to represent it" (12). The narrator can use the reader's sense of his own incomplete self to gain the reader's complicity in a proposed truth.

Foster contends that narrative has a "religious" function which is to reconcile contradiction, and that the failure of that function effects the guilt, desire and obligation which feature in confessional writing (15). Although the desire to resolve confusion informs the confessional narrative, resolution is considered specious. In this regard Foster premises his argument on Ricoeur's theory that all action in a fallen world requires interpretation (15). Foster considers the confessant a "tempter" even if penitent because s/he draws the reader into interpretations that "stray" into "reasoning incorrectly" (17), a further sin that requires further interpretation. By sin Foster means the "the fragility, possibly the illusion, of reason's grasp on knowledge" (5). Because the reader is obligated to understand, the reader effectively becomes the writer (4) entering what Foster calls "the lesson of ignorance with its burden of passion" (7). Since speech cannot be equal to the self, in other words a signified or truth, the reader becomes part of the process of meaning making; the Other through whom the narrator seeks to be understood and be confirmed as a transgressor. In this way the story the reader desires to comprehend becomes increasingly his/her own (13). The "doubling"

that the reader experiences in being confirmed by the text and rendered redundant by it, further occasions the resistance of the reader who desires autonomy (13). Hence confessional writing becomes a discourse of power, both reader and narrator are implicated in the obligation to interpret the truth, and are complicit in the desire for redemption.

Because the suffering and obligation incurred through the sense of loss can be given a meaning through language (127), the reader can accord the narrator or writer the "mastery of meaning" and hence be dominated by the discourse. Foster perceives as necessary the confessional narrative that refuses "truth" and instead dialogises the sources of knowledge in the discourses of (Western) culture (135).

It is Foster's contention that existential freedom is mythic, and that confessional dialogue be founded not on the concept of sin (and consequent truth) but on the concept of discourse as a construct, thus implicating both narrator and reader in "a web of language" (135), the deconstruction of which becomes a means of signification. I shall return to Foster's theory later in the introduction.

1.4.4 *J.M. Coetzee* in "Confession and Double Thoughts: Tolstoy, Rousseau and Dostoevsky" (1992,(1985)), examines the question of how to bring confession to an end "in the secular equivalent of absolution" (1992:252) given the "regression to infinity of self-awareness and self-doubt" (274).

The problematic of secular confession as Coetzee sees it, is founded on the nature of rational consciousness wherein, as Tolstoy and Dostoevsky indicate, "the self cannot tell the truth of itself to itself and come to rest without the possibility of self-deception" (291). In this instance of scepticism about rational self-knowledge, and in the absence of faith, the only release would be through death (249). For Dostoevsky release occurs through the intervention of grace, experienced in the moment of self-forgiveness (290). Coetzee acknowledges that the question of how to attain truth of oneself and experience self-forgiveness, finally transcending self-doubt, remains "a mystery" (290). The conundrum is whether there is a "way to truth beyond self-consciousness through self-consciousness" (293), the impatience with which, as Coetzee suggests, has Tolstoy decide (in his *Kreuzer Sonata*) that the truth must be set down at some point even in the absence of self-reflexivity on the narrator's part (293). We are to assume that point to be the act of writing itself.

The truth "of" and "about" the writer or narrator can be perceived by the reader as different from the truth s/he avows, particularly when the unconscious truth slips out in "strange associations, false rationalisations, gaps, contradictions" (257). It is argued by

Coetzee that the confessional situation brings about the"deformations" of truth, and the contradictory impulses behind the act of confessing (259) because of the given will to self-deception. For Tolstoy, Coetzee argues, the condition of truthfulness is founded on an attentiveness to "an inner impulse" or "an impulse toward God" (261) through which is experienced a change within the site of the self. In this light it is not self-knowledge but truth-directedness (262) that informs the work of restitution.

Rousseau, Coetzee proposes, takes present self-knowledge as a given, in which self-deception is not possible. According to Coetzee, Paul de Man opposes this stance with the distinction between a confession of verifiable truth and an excuse, and within the excuse the confessant assures the reader that the truth is what he thinks it to be (266). The truth for Rousseau resides in the immediacy of "present feeling" rather than in the distance from oneself arrived at through self-reflexivity (268). Coetzee contends that the end of confession is "to tell the truth to and for oneself" (291). Rousseau's intention on the other hand is "to fascinate" the reader through his process of only half revealing his mysteries. Coetzee sees this as a strategy which allows him to maintain the freedom that comes of having "capital", that is, that shameful desires are more valuable if only half-spent (272). To continue Coetzee's metaphor, the "currency" Rousseau deals in is power (over the reader) rather than a concern for truth.

Coetzee proposes that because the confessant conceives of himself as "a truth-teller", other "readings" may displace his identity and cause him to shift ground. This movement discloses a danger of the confessant's becoming "a constructor of hypotheses about [the] self" (273) in which knowledge rather than self-knowledge directs the search for truth.

Dostoevsky, Coetzee argues, subsumes the question of self-revelation into the discussion of whether it is possible to tell the truth about the self in an age of "hyperconsciousness" in nineteenth century St Petersburg (275). The self is conceived of as unable to act, having no basis in certainty, because of the "endless awareness of awareness" (275) - also termed as "behind every mask another mask" (or motive) (280). Coetzee suggests that this movement argues a desire not for truth but a desire "to be a particular way" (280), and that repressed truths can emerge to show that certain struggles remain unexamined. Because of "double thoughts" or the contradictory motives for confession, it is difficult for the confessant not to be either severe in his judgement of himself, or mistaken in his "subjecting truth to desire" (283). For Dostoevsky it is only self-forgiveness that can close the chapter and transcend the infinite regression of shame (290).

In his study of the three writers cited, J.M. Coetzee foregrounds the point that the uncertainty of whether the truth one avows is the truth, is already a matter for

confession (274). This problematises the nature of truth as ever-shadowed by another truth, which although it allows an endless generation of the text also premises a "sterile" and endless deferral of truth (292).

Uncertain of the means to the transcendence of self-doubt, and the means to self-forgiveness, Coetzee nonetheless argues for the position in which the "contest is staged [in the soul]", in other words, of having a say (250). In his interview with David Attwell on the subject of confession, it is not the outcome of the contest that Coetzee considers important, but the fact that the contest *is* staged and *is* heard (250), arguing finally perhaps for the position of writing itself, which is that it is a political act. And it follows that confession, in which authority and truth are contested, is a political act because it is an act of revision and re-vision.

1.5 Aspects of Confessional Writing

1.5.1 Confessional Writing as a Response to Loss

Foster refers to Ricoeur's theory that "any disruptive, transgressive experience, any new experience, violates that totality we call the self" (15), and because an effect attends a cause, the self perceives that there must have been sin, in other words a violation of the divine totality (1987:15). This argues a desire for wholeness from a position of separateness, which may be founded on the semiotic or prelapsarian bliss which Lacan, Kristeva and Freud propose is displaced with the child's inception into language. Language evidences a fallen world in which the self is divided because it is reified as an effect of language, that is "I" (Foster 1987:107). The desire to recover the unified, heterogeneous self or self-presence, places the child in Oedipal contention with the Father, whose law is the symbolic order founded on language. The loss of truth, which is experienced as the loss of a complete self, is conceived of as a transgression because it is concomitant with the knowledge of good and evil (Foster 1987:117-118). Confession is one response to this subtext of loss and guilt; the subtext is experienced as a lack of control over the "gap between any signifying form and an ultimate truth toward which it is directed" (Foster 1987:131). The desire to control, or to master the gap, manifests itself in confessional writing in which the desire for the mythic pattern of completeness takes the form of a journey retracing the path of transgression.

The "uncertain search for words" that Anna Rossouw suffers in *A State of Fear* (1983:28) can be read as her contention with the Father through an awareness of the semiotic "world of oneness" (184) that her brother was unable to recover. Unlike him,

she can accept that it is "the small murder [of experience] that inaugurates each symbol" (1983:185). This contention with the law of the Father, or as Foster terms it, with the unity of words the Father possesses (1987:110), is finally unresolvable for her, because while she desires meaning through language, she disclaims language as only ever "self-referential" (1983:24). Disowning the Father or the symbolic order - in her words: "Disowning Papa" (26) - would mean death as it did for her brother. That she ends her confessional narrative with these words to her father: "Your thoughts have found their way into me, I know" (188), vindicates her position as a writer and renders her both complicit with and critical of the Father, and the process of meaning-making.

Foster proposes that our need for meaning is founded on our desire for a bliss that is "irrecoverably lost" (1987:127). For Elizabeth Curren in *Age of Iron* the process of meaning-making is a matter of life over death, of keeping alive "the deep-down stirring of knowledge" (1990:133) that asserts itself in opposition to the Law (of the Father) with its imposition of the Yes-No binary. She believes the Yes or No law precludes the "unheard" possibilities, "stifled" as they are by the "rules " of the master narrative. In this way her confessional narrative can be read as the repressed oppositional voice of what van Wyk Smith terms the "transgressive sub-plot" (1991:93).

1.5.2 Confessional Writing as Oppositional

Confessional writing is premised on a discourse of self-doubt, hence it problematises the self as both resistant to containment by the master narrative or law of the Father, and complicit with it, since it is through the Other that the Self is mediated and constructed. It is in Bakhtin's words a "dialogic act" in which the self is in dialogue with the other. Of the multifarious forms of the other is the sub-text of the political unconscious which as Jameson holds is "what did not happen", an "absent cause" in history. In his contention, the cultural artifact is the symbolic resolution of a real contradiction (Dowling 1984:119) since repression of the subtext is registered in the construct of the narrative. The story or confession the narrator seeks to tell is a construct of the contradiction and aporias experienced in this dialectic of self and other, in which, as Gusdorf notes, "[p]rivate motives [are] the obverse of history" (1980:36). As Elizabeth Curren says to her daughter "attend to the writing, not to me. If lies and pleas and excuses weave among the words, listen for them. Do not pass them over, do not forgive them easily" (1990:95-96). The subtext of the white writer/confessant in this country is occasioned by guilt and shame; an imaginative rendering to self of the suffering of others becomes transformative because it asserts the need for reconstruction. The contradictions inherent in the lived and untenable position of guilt can be seen to propose the oppositional act of confessional writing. In

this way the confession functions as ritual, as a public text for the private subtext of doubt. The authorial voice of the master narrative is displaced by the unsettled self in the process of resettling cultural foundations. The renewal of self in the process of signification is concomitant with a process of meaning-making. Renewal occurs through the self-reflexive position of, in Hutcheon's words, conceptualising difference rather than othering difference. Confession thus assumes a transformative function because its concern is the demystification of its own and others' signifying practices. It is a socially empowering act because the desire for self-examination implies the examination of historical referents. Elizabeth Curren writes, "But why should I accept that my life would have been worthless no matter who held power in this land?" (1990:107). Her concern of how to constitute the self within an apprehension of dissolution is a matter of her contending with the signifying practices of the ages of granite and of iron (that is of the Afrikaner and resistant Black movements) both of which are founded on "death-driven male constructions" (137); and in conceptualising the differences of the subtext founded, for her, on the preservation of the "precious[ness]" of "blood" (58). It is a process of signification which resists the closure of the resolution of contradiction, and asserts the need for reconstruction within the historical process. Gusdorf defines History, for the Cartesian consciousness, as a "struggl[e] against the breakdown of forms and of beings" (1980:30), in which, it can be said, is implicated the re-examination of the past of the self through dialogue with the Father (Hutcheon 1988:31).

1.5.3 Confessional Writing as an Act of Community

As an avowal of self-revision, confession affirms the desire for a reconstructed social order. In its rendering complicit the reader in this act of reconstruction, it is a sign of a desire for what Doctorow termed reading as "an act of community" (Hutcheon 1988:93).

Foster contends that confessional writing enters public discourse in its dialogising of transgression and authority. Further, in confessing to transgression, the narrator allows the reader access to the limits and uncertainties of the experiential self. The dialogue occurs between two unsettled subjects, but because the confessant entrusts his/her sense of loss to the reader, the reader is expected to make sense of the guilt and in effect to recover the relational from the divisive order. The confessant attributes to the reader the function of meaning making, hence the reader becomes complicit in the desire to arrive at truth. Because the reader is unsettled by the transgressions of the narrator, and because resolution is endlessly deferred in and by the text, the reader is constrained to engage in a self-reflexive act of interpretation, and similarly of revision.

This is the position Iser (1974) defines for the production of meaning in literary texts, that is that the reader formulates his/her self through the text's "evocation and subsequent negation of the familiar" (1980:64). Foster further contends that because the reader is implicated in the interpretive and interactive discourse, s/he is transformed into "the next avatar of memory and obligation" (1987:124) to take up the narrative and its indeterminacies.

The form of the confessional narrative is predicated on the other; the epistolary form of *Age of Iron* and *A State of Fear* engages and also accuses the second person. The form resists what Lodge terms "interpretive closure" (1990:23) and privileges uncertainty and its attendant resettling of truths. As Daymond (1992:108) proposes in her essay on Menán du Plessis, the reader's activity in making sense of the narrative re-enacts the efforts of the narrators to make sense of their own lives, reconstructing provisional interpretations at the interface of new knowledge. Olney writes of autobiography as a self-critical act, in which the "self defines itself from moment to moment...as a security against [the] outside whirl" (1980:24). Similarly, confessional writing is a process of "writing the self out" and a process in which the reader participates, so that to continue Olney's argument, the created self becomes almost as much the reader's as the narrator's (1980:24). This is endorsed in Foster's formulation that the reader becomes engaged in the same motivations as the writer/narrator though he may not recognize that the history he desires to understand becomes increasingly his own (1987:13).

The process of signification in the confessional form is a process of constant revision because meaning and resolution are constantly deferred by the narrative-in-search-of-truth. *A State of Fear* ends with the desire of its narrator "to find a path for [the] self", up towards the kloof, "grabbing at thorn bushes, stones, earth, vygies" (1983:189). But she cannot escape the knowledge of political deaths "in shadow[s]" (190). The narrative non-closure on the guilt of such knowledge positions the narrator Anna within the the "ontological landscape" (McHale 1986:38) in which the self dialogises its commitment to what Bakhtin has termed "the unresolved contemporaneity of the present" (Hirschkop 1986:56). In *Age of Iron* Elizabeth Curren's letter of "truth and love together" addresses the "soul" of her daughter/reader (1990:118). It is "a wager on trust," as she says; if her writings are not read a "certain body of truth will never take on flesh: my truth: how I lived in these times, in this place" (119). Hence she is bound to those who can repeat her; she is, in Foster's sense, represented by her discourse (1987:132).

In their commitment to the "unresolved present" the narrators of the works cited engage the reader in the "act of community". The reader is complicit in the narrator's

desire to know, to acknowledge anxiety and transgression, and to redeem the self through a reconstitution of ethical paradigms. The ontological self of both narrator and reader is reconfigured through the resettling of codes in the search for truth. That disclosure of any truth follows interpretation is a possibility toward which all writing and reading is directed. It is perhaps, in Elizabeth Curren's words, an embracing to be embraced (5).

CHAPTER 2 : Menan du Plessis' *A State of Fear* (1983)

2.1 A Dialectic of Love and a Dyad of Fear

The narrator of *A State of Fear* is Anna Rossouw, a young teacher at a 'coloured' school in the early 1980's, a time, as Daymond says, of "sustained civic unrest as political protest in South Africa" (1992:108). In her confessional, epistolary narrative Anna Rossouw searches for a politics that would be "more profound than revolution itself, yet still simple enough to explain the fate of my own brother to me" (1983:175).

Anna's narrating "I" can be seen, in Nussbaum's terms, as "a locus where discourses intersect" (1988:150) as she retrieves her past through her reader-self, "speculating; inventing a history" (1983:87) in order to re-enter history and be accountable for her own truths. Her multiple concerns arise from her perceived position of exclusion and loss: the loss of her father, who as a poet is in self-imposed exile in France; and of her brother, who did not recover from his breakdown and who, it seems, sought his own death by going out into bush country in search of a "no man's land, where he would belong to nobody else". He did not come back (111). She fears exclusion from the symbolic order of meaning and the attendant retreat, like that of her brother Frans, into unmediated being. And she suffers exclusion from the struggle for black liberation, mistrusting on the one hand the "romantic idealism" of revolutionary utopias (42) yet desirous on the other of not being (guiltily) complicit in any "impasse" (14). Her confessional narrative is a self-reflective view of her inability to "act", and so to effect change, which she perceives as a transgression of humanness. The process of self-writing becomes a restitution for her of the possibility of "transformations, dialectic, redemption" (164) that she sees as necessary for signification. Her epistolary narrative is also - retrospectively - her *künstlerroman* in that it evidences her entry into writing from the symbolic oppression of her Father-Poet: she knows that she has "never been able to let Papa go" (27), and that all her own poetry had been written secretly for him (20), but that there is "a last, perhaps saving feeling that Papa is the one person I must never begin writing to" (62). She does not choose him as her "remote confessor" (62) here, in the self-knowledge that "The Answer" is what she has always wanted from him (62), and must disengage herself from in order to find her own voice and her own truths.

She is writing in the winter of 1980, from within "our permanently violent state" (2) in which police shoot children. The black and 'coloured' boycott of schools and the general boycotts and strikes all implicate her, and she says repeatedly that she is not

sure that she can go back to school. But she does go back, because "you have to help children when they're afraid. You can't just abandon them" (11). Two of her adolescent pupils, Felicia and Wilson, take refuge in her home as activists. She gives the "children" her bed, only wondering after Wilson's probable death in detention whether the two had been lovers. She is unable to call them "soldiers" (52), despite their belief that guerilla warfare demands their role, even if, in Felicia's words, their role is "just one of those tiny pebbles .... [in the stream]" (158). Anna does not know the particular activities they are involved in nightly, sensing her "vain belief that [she] had some right to know" (124), and she notes only the "madness" of any activity in the "icy-black" wetness of the Cape winter (100). She does not know their thoughts other than those inspired by revolutionary doctrine - the children are non-communicative and hostile, dependent as they are on the very privilege they work against. She proffers what she can of herself: her books, her copy of Memmi's *The Coloniser and the Colonised*, and her love, but is "left to reveal [her]self constantly in the act of assaulting that silence" (125). She had almost expected their coming, she says, and had resisted the change it would demand of her (49), willing it to be "a fiction" (51), but she accepts the children in a way that is to become a pattern:

> Foolishly I toyed with the blankets, trying to cover their stiff limbs: but they were heavy almost immediately with sleep; the girl's knee jutting defiantly out from under the rug.
> I went and made two cups of cocoa - the proper way, warming the milk till the bubbles were just rising at the rim of the saucepan. (49)

Taking the cocoa through to the children, she watches their "fitful" sleep. She goes back to her study, "although I'd lost all my heart for letters" (50). The letters she speaks of constitute her narrative, addressed to an unspecified "you" which we may understand as her oppositional self.

In the early weeks of their refuge with her, she gives in to a suspended time, deciding - despite the telling discomfort of a "burning ache in her chest" (50) - that the children are "bright, unsentimental; they know what they're doing" (52), from which we might read that she does not. She writes that their co-existence is "almost comfortable":

> we live indoors, sealed away from the rain and the funneling wind, and there's no need for talk, as they read all day, and I type out my letters in the study. I plan the meals serenely, and when I come to prepare them find myself inexplicably hushed into an odd state of grace that allows my fingers not to fumble.
>
> I know that it will have to end. (76)

The state of suspension allows for a recovery of a certain kind of unmediated childhood experience, of being "lost in stories" (88). It cannot withstand the anger and

hostility of "real conversation" (81) as Anna discovers, in which she counters Wilson's "spectacularly swift rhetoric" (of received agitprop) with a scepticism that shames her (83) and by borrowing her brother Francois' ideas about the greater need for a "single, global ecology" of holistic interaction with the environment (21) as more urgent than the boy's revolutionary claims. The Green movement is not Anna's answer to social and political wrongs (as she says, she only "pretended" she knew the answer (83)), but neither is their current revolutionary mode. Caught in the deadlock of this exchange with the young activists, she is surprised by an image she has of a father's "grip[ping] you in his arms and hold[ing] you to him ... his fingers moving lightly, amazedly over your forehead, your cheekbones" (87). Anna identifies in this vision a "dialectic of love" (87) and it is one of the rare epiphanic moments in a context overdetermined by the political where, for the children, it is "only eternal revolution that can liberate us spiritually..." (86).

Her fear for the children intensifies: their opposition to their "clear-eyed oppressors" (3), she realises with misgiving, is serious and, in the knowledge that "the world they're prodding at doesn't resist ever, but keeps on yielding to them" (87), dangerous. She longs for an end to this winter, and wonders whether she is becoming "bitter" about the entire situation:

> Because thinking that the changing seasons don't after all magically induce similar changes in societies. And our annual nostalgia of syringa, pittosporum, the dry heat of the berg wind, honeysuckle, dust and sweet-peas - perhaps it's the memories of things that ought to have been.(100)

When Felicia comes back alone one morning, she and Anna are suddenly faced with one another "across the threshhold" (115). Panic-stricken, Anna slips into a maternal language more of "cadences than words; too frightened to let up" (115). She puts Felicia into a heavy jumper and notices her lack of resistance when she eases off the sodden shoes and socks from her feet (116). The panic and fear invoke, or more pointedly release, Anna's concern for all young revolutionaries and her certainty that no utopian myth has a basis *not* grounded in fear; that for the committed Felicia the "familiar stories that surge up from the individual psyche" have only "coalesced with multiple, equally profound myths of a nation" (118). This dyad of fear (118) negates any true negotiation of private and public visions. She realises that "[w]orkable truths - the social ones - are always shifting, relative, I suppose" (119).

2.2 The Idea of the Father

The ambiguity of Anna's own truism, "How can you not love the idea of the father" (80), provides an instance of the conflicting motivations that J.M. Coetzee finds

definitive of confession and confessional writing. It decentres Anna's Papa/Anton from the position of Author/God, and relativises him as the lover in *Liefdesverse* (26), and as the father who was discomfited by the "abrupt demands" of a "gauche" child (62) but intensely loving that child all the same, still "scrawl[ing]" poems for her birthday on the back of postcards of modernist art (which she had liked as a youngster) (6). The small child who used to take a soft-boiled egg into Papa at his desk every morning (90) is the same 'child' abandoned by her father's love for another woman, and who consequently projects her thwarted desire "to be crushed against [his] cable-knit sweater" (170) as the *"odd[ness]"* of his imagined hands "delighting so feelingly in the dark, tangled mass of a stranger's hair" (26, emphasis added).

Anna's narrative is interpolated with startling details about her father's love for her, which underscores the importance of consensual bonds to her. An instance of this is her sudden and unconscious focalising, within a discourse on language, on the certainty of love: as she questions and validates the transformative power of words to recreate our personal visions of reality, she notes that the words are "as heavily real as the weight of a father's hand on his daughter's neck - while he touches those hollows of flesh and bone near her throat" (25). Such love is not unproblematic for her, as she wonders "what happens normally" when a child *is* able to objectify her father as part of a class, for example, and the "numinous aura" dims (88-89). This transition did not happen in her childhood. We know it did not upset her to be one of the "gutter-children" that the Ravenscroft girl was not allowed to play with, because, in the words of the English child, "your father is a poet...He writes in Ofrikaans" (89) - a truth blithely sanctioned by the father into whose "heather mix and knotted leather buttons" the girl giggled, "sick with glee" (89).

Even before Papa became Anton Rossouw, the poet, and she "Anton Rossouw's stiff-faced, awkward daughter" (48), *he* had to "win [her] back", "protesting [and] joking" against her burning face and her arms held rigidly against his embrace (41). Her present narrating consciousness wonders at this younger self of hers in need of being 'won back', and then "loudly demanding" (95) his "concessions" toward her (96), and as an adolescent, wanting him "to save" her. She remembers that when she was thirteen she discovered the word 'apartheid' and that she began "stealing away" the newspaper once her father had finished with it. In her fear that her father was complicit in the injustice (or "nightmare", which is a word she uses frequently), she would try to "pummel" him into an argument, realising now in her retelling that she really wanted "answers, even attack" (44). Her adolescent inscription into history carried with it a sense of guilt and shame, and her father's recognition that she felt responsible inclined him to her with "silent restraint" (44). Now she understands, in her revision, that his

response was founded on a serious regard for her (44). It was her mother who spoke out in self-defence, asking whether it had not occurred to her that "we've felt all of these things ourselves you know" (44) and that with no Progressive candidate in their constituency, she and Papa did not vote (45).

Anna is uneasy about her father's place in the hegemony (41). As a Sestiger poet he was "ardently admired" (42), but as Ampie Coetzee has said, "the hegemony was jealous of its producers of culture: it was actively appropriating culture by means of prizes, bursaries, scholarships" (1990:345) at a time when, as Trump notes, "the political beliefs of Afrikaans writers were frequently challenged" (1990:47). Some of the events of the 1960's, as Trump lists, were the complete disenfranchisement of the 'coloureds'; the Sharpeville massacre; the sentencing of Bram Fischer, an Afrikaner thought highly of, for treason; and a tightening of the censorship laws. Even though Anna and her brother grew up with the sense that "the leaders of state were contemptible" and that the "true heroes" were in detention or exiled (41), Afrikaner nationalism had won academic and official recognition for Afrikaans - "Papa's own language" (41) - and Anna is not comfortable with her friend Marianne's ironising, as a radical Afrikaner, the 'individualism' of the Sestigers as a "febrile decadence" (42). She perceives instead that their modernism was a "delight" in an emergent Kultuur (170) and that it was historically "revolutionary" (42). Furthermore, she is more clearly her father's daughter than she is her mother's - a "tall, strong-boned woman" who "resents" the "quietly raging pain" of her own ageing mother (7), and whose "cynical smile" Anna escapes from through her infrequent visits to her (173). Anna confesses a lack of kindness toward her mother (8,173), and tellingly refers to her as Constance. It is worth noting that her name allegorises the uncertain virtue of the long-suffering, evident in "she'd be stalking off already to the verandah, with a book under her arm" as the children, off with their father for a walk on the beach, would roll down their windows to wave to her (95). It is possible that Anna, in her own "selfishness" (173), is unforgiving of that same aspect "slumped broodingly inward" in her mother (173). Both Anna and her brother have Afrikaans names; Anna, or Papa's Antjie, is derivative of Anton, and she refers to herself as "Anton Rossouw's daughter". She has grown up speaking English, but at a student party she notes "theirs was not a language that I wanted to share" (135). She is austere in her judgement of the fathers of these students, who, she imagines, trade in shares of industries that exploit black labour. She recalls:

> I have always lacked words for pride, I know, and for power, but the lacunae they left were suddenly filled with a shameful vindictiveness: that young people so finely dressed and fat could dare to blame Afrikaners even for the grossness of their own ennui. Seeing themselves as the oppressed. I reached out, I

remember, and touched the woody stem of the wistaria". (136)

She is also stung by a passing remark about "boere", knowing that the title poem of *Sprakeloos* ('wordless') is about her father's father who, interned by the English, returned to find that his wife and small boys had died in a concentration camp and that his farm was a burnt ruin. And how he walked through farms over the three provinces, shearing sheep as a way of building himself up again. Papa was the *laatlammetjie* of an old man "wordless with grief" who had recovered his land, but who sent "his youngest child away to school in the Cape" (137). Anna knows the "myth" of the father has not dimmed for her, because she wonders how things would have been "if Papa's numinous aura had...faded" (88-89). Her constant reading of, and (re)iteration of his poetry in her own narrative, her concern with his history, and his present political position as "right" (170), render him numinous to her still, and painfully absent from a dyad of love. Furthermore, she desires the "assuredness" she imaginatively confers on Afrikaans children, whose "beauty...something in their faces, their bearing" comes from "[k]nowing that you belong to a community. Or rather, *not* knowing it: taking it for granted" (61). Anna's desired reconciliation with the other and with the public arises from her perceived exclusion from the collective, of knowing you belong, in Mandel's words, to a body of "shared truths larger than ourselves" (1980:69). It is a contradictory desire, critical as Anna is of the "myths" of 'shared truths'. This is a problematic I shall take up later.

2.3 Self and Other Self

As the homodiegetic narrator-narratee of *A State of Fear*, Anna speculates on the existence of a second self as she looks into the reflected self of a woman in a mirror and realises: "Somewhere was an I able to observe that woman observing" (164). The self's emergence as a discursive subject from that "locked state" (164) of specular relation - in Lacanian terms from the Imaginary to the Symbolic order - is founded for her on the matrix of self and self's other:

> Yet how is it possible. Unless somewhere in the mind there is an unreachable, encysted core of memory where the still-born twin of the soul lies trapped in permanent, living nightmare; so that *there* would be the hidden place necessary for transformations, dialectic, redemption. (164)

The still-born twin of the soul - her other - can be seen in terms of Kristeva's disrupted subject of the semiotic *chora*, which Moi (1985:162), Mathie (1991:127) and Eagleton (1983:188) show is never fully repressed and is the oppositional other of the symbolic order. As Moi puts it, the interaction between the *semiotic* and the *symbolic* constitutes the signifying process (1985:161). Her other self that is "trapped", as Anna perceives it,

in a "nightmare" of exclusion from dyadic unity with self, effects the process of signification within the Symbolic order, and the entry and subsequent re-entry into history. Belsey points to the possibilities of transformation that emerge from this crisis of division: that it is only in the process of construction that the self is capable of change (1980:65) and hence of constituting "a new kind of society" (1980:64).

Anna's other self impels her repositioning in history within the symbolic order and the ethical responsibility that attends it. Her words, "Maybe it's necessary, if you're realistically committed to a changed world - that you accept the taint that comes from existing in the present one" (171) and "I've tried so hard to resist - believing, still believing that history cannot be deadlocked" (173), manifest her acceptance of the loss of wholeness as necessary for inscription into the symbolic order and the personal and social accountability that constitute it. When she says "it's absurd to speak of impasse" (173) she is in effect inscribing herself into history in the conscious knowledge of her own temptation to follow her naturalist brother's retreat into the semiotic "world of oneness" (184), of holistic "non-alienation" (187), of death really. As Anna is finally able to see it, this world of silence, of being without dialectic, is a "surrendering of humanness" (173) because "We're human beings: survivors of floods, catastrophes and even our myths; ja, we're living and responsive; and answerable" (173).

Her epistolary confession is her refusal of that silence: she "feel[s] compelled" she says, "to fill up [her evenings] with letters" (15), only interrupting her typing to note the sound of the neighbour's chained Alsatian "barking now at the wind, or the darkness perhaps" (15). It is the desire to narrate herself in the (unconscious) search for redemption which retrieves her from "invisibility" (153). Her certainty that "you fight back only when something is destroying you"(162) signals what for her is a transgression of humanness: that of being "without history; unresisting" (153).

Her restlessness, her sense of being "driven to speak all the time, to ask questions in stammers [of herself]" (15) is her struggle against the death drive that she perceives "romantics" like her father and brother gave in to: her brother insisted that "he would win back his lost, innocent world of oneness" (184), and her father "*let* his useless dreams collapse inward, into self-gratification" (184, emphasis added). Against the unresisting idealism of the two people she has loved most, the memory of whom informs her confessional narrative, Anna must revise her vision of love and of a role that is acceptable to her. When she writes finally that the "sharpened, careful" thoughts of her poet-father "have found their way into me" (188), she rewrites it as "miskien is dit jou skerp, ruwe besinnings wat my *in my stille wese gesteek het* (188, emphasis added), accepting that for her, consciousness and language will always render her a

"burned, bleeding gift" (22) to herself and to others. Her truth and her redemption lie in the pain of her exclusion and loss from the mythic dyad with her father, in the "nothingness" (22) that she will 'fight' to fill with meaning. Freud, Lacan and Kristeva have posited that it is only through absence of specular love, and difference from the lost object: the mother, or Kristeva's Imaginary Father (in Oliver, 1991:51), that the self desires to counter the 'lack'. The counter is the symbolic order of language through which we recreate meaning and reality in the hope of recovering the bliss that is, as Foster says, "irrecoverably lost" to us (1987:127).

Anna's process of signification and re-entry into history contends with her own liberal humanist uncertainty about 'action' and her fear of being "an utter fool and allow[ing] myself to be swept along with the unthinking, populist drift; and also much more simply afraid: afraid in the absolute" (15). This is the fear that undermines liberal humanism, we may take it, and which manifests itself in the paradox of desiring to preserve the self while desiring transcendence of that self. It is the dialectic that informs Anna's confession, and which she seeks to mediate through her other self. It is a self she fears, as will be shown, but which concomitantly allows her to decentre liberal humanism and romantic idealism, both of which inscribe the subject into a "self-enclosed unity" (171) that precludes effective engagement with change in the relational social order.

Anna's declared need for a "confessor" (62) evidences her desire to transcend the self-enclosed unity she attributes to those incapable of commitment to a changed world. It also 'authorises'- through the construct of a second self - her emergence into writing her story through the revisionary process of narrating the self before that other. The other, the "you" she addresses, is the second-person self-addressee rather than an extradiegetic narratee. Karl Miller sees this device as "adopting the old confessional metaphor of the second self in order to evoke [the self's] experience of life" (1985:432). The second self is also the double of an experiential double life, and the fictional double or *doppelgänger*. The basis of duality is founded on the metaphysical division of soul and body, and in twentieth century psychoanalysis, on the split between the conscious and unconscious self, or in Jungian terms in the existence of the Shadow and the contending Superego. We may ascribe to this self at variance with itself, the term 'sinner', since the division is charged with suffering and with the desire for salvation. Anna is aware that her own "desire for absolution" disrupts her commitment to others (169). When she points to the idea in her father's collection *Sprakeloos* ("wordless" or "voiceless") of the "breathless, wordless pause before an utterance that makes most spoken meanings possible" (24) she is uncovering, perhaps discovering, the contradiction between the two selves which makes meaning possible. As she says of

the coloured children she teaches who speak of themselves as "the disenfranchised" (24), new words suggest "new worlds" (24), a "way of recreating one's vision of reality" (25). It is, we may infer, the disruptive other - in Kristeva's sense, the semiotic process - that undermines the fixity of signs in the conscious symbolic order, and that decentres received ideology, such as the notion of resignation to racial and class injustice that the word 'coloured' as self-reference signifies.

In declaring her need for a confessor, Anna is setting up a construct through which to attend to the process of revision. Furthermore, she is problematising the notion of, in Spender's words, "an adequate confessor" (1967:121) through which to objectify her transgressions, and resist the temptation to justify her *silence* before the increasing militarisation of the state in the four years since her peaceful protest in solidarity with the Soweto pupils in 1976 ended in her group's being stormed by police on the steps of the Cathedral. It is a time she filled with letters, some "even tentatively addressed to actual people" but which she never posted (19). Their symbolic analogue, her epistolary confession we have as readers, commits itself to being judged by the perceived dominant of the other. The other to whom and from whom she writes is not a self/person she loves. She says she thought briefly that her 'reader' might be her friend Marianne, with whom she teaches and who, in the "extreme convictions" she holds about the ontological (inescapable) reality of suffering and injustice, will "blink and stammer; finally turning away, bereft of language" (78). But "I love Marianne", Anna says, "- why should I write to her? No. In reality, I suppose, you must be a stranger to me" (15). The implication is that her speaking self would already be preserved by an other who loves, and would not need to justify itself before such love. This is borne out in my proposal of the dominant other, before whose censure the self experiences shame and guilt. Anna writes of her confessor, "I feel almost afraid of you...." (15), because of the propensity for meaning-making that the confessor has. When she says to the second person, "You ... alter this fragmented print into a flowing pattern of remembered meaning within your own mind" (15), she is problematising the notion of authorship, based as it is at the interstices of conflicting selves, or in the Lacanian gap between the signifier and signified that 'authorship' seeks to master. The discursive practice that she sets up with the other would seem to invite a dialogic act, but her conscious self is troubled, and intent on self-preservation. Daymond makes this point when she notes that the "internally sufficient" nature of Anna's epistolary fiction leads the reader away from the interactive process toward a passive reception of Anna's search for, in Daymond's words, a "stable basis of belief" (1992:102). Anna's desire to preserve herself is borne out in her self-ironising confession over the letters amassed in her desk drawer: "some sort of deception, I suspect. Pretend you're handing over something of your real self, but then withhold it after all...." (19). This

confession evidences her (spurious) effort at self-preservation in which she is held "safely back from the reckless world where I imagine you are capable of flexing real fingers...." (16) - or, we might read, of flexing real judgement.

As is recognised of writerly texts in which the narrator is involved in re-interpreting her own values, the 'other' fulfils the function of the participatory reader. When Anna says "I was beginning to feel a failure because I couldn't provide alternatives for a child like Felicia" (124), she desires "forgiveness or condemnation" (1980:120) from her confessor/self, either of which, Spender argues, will restore the confessant to an ethical order.

In her unresolved relationship with her father who, she says (in defense against her abandonment by him) "never taught me the words for hatred, any more than he taught me ones for love" (170), she wonders at not having chosen him to act as her "remote confessor" (remote because in France, and possibly because of his inscrutable politeness). She gives her reasons, which I shall return to later as central to her entry into history both as a subject and as a writer, in the "double" context of what Miller sees as the mixed feelings of the adolescent who wants "both to supplant and to emulate the father [s]he resembles" (1985:45).

To return to the subject of the other as her double, it is notable that she supposes the "you" must be a stranger who, she fears, subverts her authorial intention: "Really there's only you and I, who hold one another warily, rigidly at bay..." (120), but with whom she shares the ambivalent position of intimacy: "What else. What else to tell you" (9), and before whom she desires to account for her fear of dissolution: "I was upset, distracted, the whole of yesterday - trying to write you a letter" (87). That she seeks to justify her troubled self as a self that suffers, positions her double as, in Miller's words, "an oppressor, a possessor ... a tyrant or parent" (1985:47). But her double is also familiar to her and assumes the position of an attendant spirit, as is evinced in her sensing the nearness of "someone alive, breathing, and close enough to reach out and touch me" (179) - in effect to save her from the near loss of herself when the triangular piece of glass she thought to pull away from between the cracks in the window pane, so to avert its splintering in a gale, came away suddenly from its old Victorian casement and "I hardly knew I was falling backward, while my hand was suddenly stiff, unbearably stiff. From the centre of my fist ... came a slow seeping of blood ... everything became distended" (178) and "I was still fighting to remember, What does one do" (179). Her 'loss of herself' is prefaced by her knowledge that the young activist, Wilson, whom she has been sheltering, is dead (178). This knowledge comes with "something clamouring" in her ears (176) as she recalls the story at school

of the military helicopters over the school grounds, hovering just over the heads of the children in the mass demonstration: that while the children screamed the police pretended to take aim, and in fact did shoot (at the ground?) (177). Anna senses "words swirling in my mouth, faintly sweet" (178) - foetid? in this recollection, and moves into the gnomic present tense, hence constructing an unmediated fear: "There's something that pushes me away, welling up; the silence inside words breaking out under my hands...light-filled, faintly dusty spaces accuse me" (180), and she sees her mother "faceless" beginning to turn away from her (180-181).

This is also the abandonment of the child that is metonymic of the concerns in *A State of Fear*. "Where the double is", Miller says, "the orphan is never far away" (1985:39). As he sees it, the orphan assumes many shapes and names, some of which are: "outsider", "stranger", "changeling", "waif", "victim", "fugitive", "writer" (43). And in orphan narratives, certain words in particular are used, like: "strange", "fey", "soul", "solitude", "imagination", "escape", "dream", "delirium", "flight", "sick" (44). Anna recalls that as a child of twelve she overheard Papa "attacking Mom about me: 'Constance, for heaven's sake, can't you do something with Anna? I don't know who she thinks she is, scowling ... all the time'" (93), and that the "singing sound" filled her head (93) (in what we take as her fearful response to loss and exclusion, both as a child and as the adult narrating "I"). She remembers feeling sick for weeks afterwards whenever someone spoke to her at school, and that her "desperate desire to escape" (93) has always manifested itself in tiny points of sweat on her upper lip (which she shares with her brother Frans) and in a "raging thirst" (93-94). When Papa's friends came to the house she says she would "fluster desolately into giggles" (94). In a sad sort of irony, she wonders whether someone should have taught her to "blush and pull funny little fey faces of self-doubt" (93) when as a small child she stared her way through kindergarten. That is until (an attendant spirit) a teacher, "led [her] along the unfamiliar length of the concrete stoep" and showed her the library, a "converted toolshed, really", meshed wire at the windows and still smelling of spades: "[she] [s]aid I could go there whenever I liked" (93). This flight into books becomes her way of escaping a self that does and does not desire to be a part of society, given the consequence of exclusion that such flight would have. After her storming by police on the steps of the Cathedral in 1976, to which I will later turn, she felt that the "dream", the "high Romance" of the Christian myth of what we may infer as redemption, had "buckled inward on itself" (130), and her narrating consciousness recalls the desired loss of herself in books in her struggle to keep the "monstrous dreams" at bay (130).

Miller (1985:45) proposes that in literature of the double the notion of transcendence is significant. It would appear that the desire to transcend the self is founded on the

perceived sense of duality, in the sense that the self is, in Miller's words, "at once hero and monster" (1985:45). Anna discloses such conflict when she refers to the *doppelgänger* which, placed early in her narrative, suggests the metonymic function of both writing and confession as a means to reconciling the self to contradictory impulses. In Kristeva's sense, writing is a way of mediating despair and integrating contradiction (1987:121). The experience of multiplicity, also known as the Keatsian 'negative capability' in which the self opens to the world and to the experience of others, has the contradictory effect of "both enhanc[ing] and annihilat[ing] the self" (Miller 1985:22). This is experienced physically as well as metaphysically by Anna in the times she senses her near loss of self - the visible, historical subject - when she is tempted to follow her brother's retreat into the semiotic *chora* of unmediated being (107); and when she experiences herself as a 'reflection' in the extremities of distress, anxiety and exhaustion - as happens in her feeling of being "incorporeal" (153) in the days following the absence of Wilson.

The fictional double for Anna is evidence of the self's bleakly heartening refusal of romanticism. The "romantic resolution" (19) depends on the negation of the "multiple, ambiguous relations with *doppelgängers*", she says (18). She arrives at this certainty through her disappointment in a pupil's essay, in which the child's self as hero enters the "charmed country" without the struggle with an "oppressive monster" (18). The child, Willie, had written on "A Journey", in which he had taken a train-ride to England, had played in a top soccer team and had gone "wherever he liked". Anna says that he made a point of staying behind to hand his dreams to her. She noted his "deep ... happiness", and is ashamed when she finds the story "facile" (18), knowing that she has her own propensities for "die oorspronklike paradystuin" and that she needs Marianne to laugh "hugely" at such "mistakes" of hers (105). Furthermore, Willie's position is representative of the petit bourgeoisie of the Cape Flats where she teaches, a group that is aware of its distinction from people who have to sleep in the sand-dunes, in the raging Cape winters of rain and hail which she imagines "slurrying down over sacking and corrugated iron sheets" (167). Or from those who live in the council blocks "blown by the scouring wind of the marshy plains" (165) where, she remembers from a newspaper article, a woman with "a child heavy in her arms" said of the gangs (and lack of police protection): "'I can't even put out my plants, in the sunlight, because they come and steal them'" (165). Into this world Anna wants to give a lesson about "novels where the lonely heroes doggedly refuse to share the dreams of the dominant class" so that she can (secretly) confess to a transgression she feels is particularly her own, which is that such heroes are undone because they "can't accept the consequences of commitment to some steady dream of a different future" (148). Her confessional narrative can be seen as a means to identify the ambiguity in her own position as a

doppelgänger - as both hero and monster - in order to uncover the transformative possibilities within disruptive multiplicity.

The epistolary form and the confessional form are modes of self-reference, in which the narrator tells her story to herself. This occasions both the self-reflective and self-reflexive text in which it is possible to say to the self's other, "You. You are the real author of my meaning, aren't you" (180). The possibility that the narrating "I" is only a voice further problematises the metafictional subject position in which, as Lodge says, "the author as a *voice* is only a function of his own fiction, a rhetorical construct" (1990:43). In her positing the "you" as a construct, Anna's "I" similarly becomes fictional: an object for interpretation. It is a dissolution of self that Anna is afraid of and that she consciously resists in order to take a subject position that is historically accountable. When she demands of her other "I'm opaque to you, aren't I? Aren't I?" (153) she is defining alterity as a praxis through which to encounter and validate the self as subject. In this way she is arguing for a way to truth beyond self-consciousness through self-consciousness. It is a paradox that J.M. Coetzee questions because of the regression to an infinity of shame that self-doubt entails (1992:290). It would seem that Anna's construct of a double self allows her to perceive self-consciousness as a means to "historical advancement" (187), through the existence of a disrupted subject as opposed to the autonomous and volitional subject of the modernist and romantic traditions. We can infer that such declared alterity redeems the self from the self-enclosed unity which admits no transformations, and posits in the place of closure, a process, which as Belsey writes is "perpetually in construction, perpetually contradictory, perpetually open to change" (1980:132).

2.4 Liberal Humanism and a Discourse of Doubt.

It is notable that Anna ends her writing with a disclosure that is shocking even if anticipated. Of the young activist, Wilson, she says "I imagine that he must be dead. Fallen, perhaps, on a concrete floor; in shadow" (190). It is a knowledge that she has hitherto evaded, as can be seen in her word "accident" which regularly interrupts the anxieties she writes about, even though Felicia has said to her before she leaves "You know he is" (159). This acknowledgement by Anna at the end vindicates the position she has defined for herself, that of not wanting to be "invisible; without history; unresisting" (153), unlike those (English speaking) liberals who "lay claim so self-flatteringly to powerlessness" (173). When Anna says "no one exists outside of history ... unless they've surrendered their humanness" (173) she is in effect opposing the world in which she finds herself, in which the state legislates against humanness and legitimates violence. The ineptness of non-action which Anna aligns with liberalism is

understood by her as a consequence of the liberal (her own) sense of "sober, bourgeois dutifulness" (169) toward the hegemony. The conflict she experiences in not wanting to align herself with this shameful powerlessness results in her oppositional "desire for absolution" (169), by which we are to understand her need "to have a say" (in J.M. Coetzee's words) through a refusal to support the principle of separatism. However, it is not a matter of resigning, in solidarity with the boycotts and strikes of 1980, from the coloured school she teaches at, since she is there in protest against the separatist privileging of the dominant class and, furthermore, cannot "abandon" the children in their fear. Despite the retort of Wilson that the education she is complicit with is a "decadent" prescription of "bourgeois aspirations" within the tenets of an unfree society (84) and her own misgivings that the values she helps teach keep the ruling class in power (62), she says, "It makes me feel old-fashioned, almost prim to confess this, but teaching is my vocation" (61), and she can only say of her friend Marianne's resignation from the school that it was "right,...I *think*" (169, emphasis added).

Anna doubts her position both as a narrator and as an oppositional voice. Her narrative is punctuated with the speculative phrases which Rimmon-Kenan refers to as "words of estrangement" (1983:81): "I don't know", "I think", " I suppose", " it seems", " I ought", " and yet", " perhaps", "after all", and the culturally laden term of empathy: "*ja*". And she readily admits to shame, fear, confusion and embarrassment. She also turns statements she is afraid to make into questions. In this way she resists containment by any particular signifying practice or ideology (she thinks), and evades possible criticism from her self-observing self and reader alike through formulations of what appear to be derivative truths rather than truths of her own making. An illustration of this is her response to her friend Nicholas's theory (he is a science teacher at the school) that it is science that frees oppressed people; and she says, "He's right, isn't he? ... he's always in touch with the current leftist line" (13). She also notes the reader's complicity in both her deception and her search for truth, when she says "our conversation keeps winding back on itself" (127). This practice of meaning-making is foregrounded in her narrative as a truth-directed construct, founded on doubt that the self can actually arrive at truth in the face of the "self-referential" (24) constraint inherent in language. She says of her brother's search for redemptive truth: "Francois was deluded. You could say that, couldn't you. Although it only means that he tried to tell the absolute truth about himself" (119). And of her own need she says, "I want to know, to understand. Maybe it's naive. To believe that if you pursue 'truth' for long enough and determinedly enough it'll break out all around you one day" (43).

Since confessional writing is an admission of doubt, the relationship of self to language is problematic because the self lacks the assurance of what Sidonie Smith

calls the "epistemological probity" (1990:11) available to the Cartesian self with its rational and totalising vision. It would appear then that the modern secular confessional mode is less a sub-genre of autobiography than it is a site of the postmodern fracture of what Smith terms the "unitary self of liberal humanism" (1990:12). Where autobiography seeks to construct a verifiable self through the self's appropriation of perceived patterns and meanings, the confessional mode seeks to uncover the discursive practices of truth and of subject positions. Liberal humanism is understood by Hutcheon (1988:X1) to be a cultural practice which unifies disparate tensions as a means to control and power. Opposing this, the confessional mode engenders teleological displacement and fracture and in fact disclaims the precept of a dominant truth. The conflict provoked in the act of confession lies in the desire for and necessary resistance to transcendence of one's world. The individual subject is decentred from its position as the organizing principle of truth, and is redefined as a construct within social and political realities. It is arguably the dialectic of struggle in *A State of Fear*, where Anna's conflict with her father, from whom she has always wanted "The Answer" (62), is the same as the struggle to decentre liberal humanism and its essentialising categories of "English or Afrikaans, black or white, liberal or radical" (175). Her search for truth is a search for "a politics that would be more profound than revolution itself" (175) and, by implication, than liberalism. It is a struggle with the construct of language itself, with the public-private division, with history - in Anna's words with "the taint that comes from existing in the present [world]" (171).

Anna Rossouw's confessional narrative contains elements of the *Bildungsroman* in that her present consciousness retrieves the past, as she says, "speculating; inventing a history" (87) within the exigencies of family structure, and within the "knowledge of one's own guilt" as the "price of survival" (111-112). She questions the moral position of "spend[ing] one's days braced in a rigid unhappiness against some imaginary future" (87), and proposes instead a dialectic of "[r]etrieving one's past" (87) as a transformative act. The "speculat[ion]" she speaks of is a means to recover history, and to subject it to examination and revision. She later accords this process of reconstruction to the function of memory (164). Gayle Greene has said that memory revises our sense of reality through its use of the past as a source of something new. Because "reality" is not transcribed but "resignified", Greene holds that memory "transforms disabling fictions to enabling fictions, altering our relation to the present and future" (1991:298). For Anna memory is the "hidden place of the soul" (164) through which she retraces perceived transgressions in the desire to redeem herself. Axthelm has pointed to the process of recollecting the past in this way as a metonym of the desire for completeness (1967:98). Greene sees the process as the past evolving in

confrontation with the present, as opposed to nostalgia, which is the desire for *nostos* - the return home - and is a process of forgetting (1991:306). Similarly for Anna, the act of remembering is an acceptance of the necessary taint that comes from demystifying the "visions that we simply take for the mundane truth of our existence" (22); and demystifying received truth itself as no more than a "burned-in circuitry capable of generating endless patterns for idle dreams and myths, romance, mysticism..." (22).

The received truth she speaks about here refers to the dialectic of interestedness in Western ideologies, including liberal-humanism, and the binarisms on which the ideologies are founded. I have purposely placed liberal humanism within this context because it is the decentring of this myth that Anna is concerned with. When she writes that in his poetry her father "found it possible to contemplate the idea of a steadily decaying order in the universe", she says it was only his ordered life, fixed by habit and Constance (89) that made it possible to accept such disintegration as an ontological reality. Her quarrel is with the *acceptance* of disorder as a reality we are not morally accountable for. In the light of what Anna observes, romanticism and liberal humanism are co-opted or endorsed by capitalism because the "self-enclosed unity" (171) of their positions can be said to gainsay commitment to a changed world. (Jameson made this point when he noted that dissident subtexts are co-opted by the hegemony). Trump says of the poetry of the Sestigers, who were reluctant to deal with political issues in their writing, that the "journey into the consciousness of the individual, which is linked to the preoccupation with existentialism, suggests a flight from history" (1990:49). This is "not a country you can escape", Anna's other self says (187) - a truth which is borne out in her opposition to those (romantics and liberals) who cannot see that "struggle [is] a dialectical process" (6).

Anna's desire for a "confessor" (62) evidences her need to transcend a self-enclosed unity and to commit herself to a changed world. She consciously resists the constraint of "disillusionment" (185) which attends the romantic longing for utopias, and which led to the loss of her father and her brother. Her father sought to escape the disillusionment that there could not be a place for writers like himself in the increasing hegemony of Black Consciousness; her brother could not effectively oppose his "private visions of a ruined, eternally darkened sky" (83) which he saw as an inescapable consequence of environmental abuse, and walked out into the wilderness. It is a similar "failure of heart" (83) which she finds herself guilty of when she disclaims the freedom Wilson fights for as an "illusion" (84). This disclosure of her impatience with his revolutionary romanticism makes her ashamed. Her justification "I've had so little practice at the living exchange of words" (85) signals the double thought in her confession, that is, the admission of her need for a confessor, and her awareness of her

own ambivalent position in the struggle for black liberation. Early on in her narrative she writes of romantic idealism as dangerous (42), evidencing her belief that despair and disillusion are its obverse, and that its adherents baulk at commitment to this world. Her epistolary confession which in its form is an avowal of self-revision, is a symbolic analogue of her resistance to what Reilly terms the "dark epiphany". He sees the negative revelation as the "blasting awareness" of one's own corruption, destructive because it is without redemptive possibilities (1988:1). This could be said to be the "failure of heart" Francois was guilty of and that Anna desires salvation from. In *A State of Fear* the redemptive possibilities are to be found in the narrator's revision of the terms of commitment and in her exchange of words with her reader and reader-self.

Anna willingly enters the problematic "relationship between self, world and text" that van Wyk Smith (1991:92) sees as definitive of the writers of the 1980's. Her reason for not choosing her father as her confessor arises, as mentioned earlier, both from the temptation of wanting "The Answer" from him and from her resistance to his answer: "I know, without really wanting to believe it, that writing out the endlessly insistent question on paper is one certain method of warding off response" (62). As is formulated by Freud, the deferral of pleasure which in this context is the Answer, is the self's way of warding off death. It follows that the confessional narrative, as a narrative in search of truth, dialogises the place of a doubting self within the redemptive possibilities of the questioning process. Of her feeling "compelled" to write letters, Anna wonders "[w]hy we're driven to speak all the time ... Why we can't just say a thing for all time, once, then be finished. Silent" (15). She is able to answer this desire for self-evasion and escape (in effect a desire for death) by her resistance to the silence her brother Frans gave in to. Her own "uncertain search for words" which she sees or ironises as her way of "[a]lways trying to hold everything together ... The whole world, maybe" (28) attests to her deep commitment to what Bakhtin terms the "unresolved contemporaneity of the present" (Hirschkop, 1986:56). It is in this way that Anna seeks to transcend the romantic idealism of her father and brother, and construct a subject position through which to revise her private and public self.

2.5 Confessional Self-revision

The processive form of Anna's narrative shapes and shifts premises for truth and transgression alike by disrupting chronology. The alternation of the past and present shows the interaction of past and present in the revisionary process, in which repetition of episodes is subject to the transformative power of recollection. Her confessional "retracing the path of transgression" is an act which commits her to re-readings of her past. Greene writes that the act of remembering is necessary if one is to escape

repetition, and be open to change (1991:291). Anna's confessional imperative militates against "forgetfulness" which she sees as "a mimicry of innocence" (44), itself a form of death since it precludes change. She makes this point when she speaks of what can be read as the nostalgic impulse in Willie's essay - of the desire for the unmediated self: "one's own sated sense of being" (18). In Newman's words, as examined in his religious autobiographical writing, "to live is to change and to be perfect is to have changed often" (in Olney 1980:242). Because past and present interact, the self is "a site of dialogue with the world, others, memory, experience and the unconscious" as Sidonie Smith sees it (1991:15).

The historical episode and its attending idealism which Anna is compelled to reinterpret is her entrapment as a student in the Cathedral with other protesters, following their "storming" by police (67) for their declared solidarity with the Soweto pupils in 1976. (We learn later that she dropped out of university that year (111), uncertain of her right to formal studies). Her first recollection of the protest inspired by a dream for equality is prefaced in the narrative by a remark of her own that she finds disparaging - the response to her pupil Willie's essay on a utopian England as "facile" (18). She counterpoints this with a truism that "everyone dream[s] about a mythical country", that "utopian enthusiasm is almost an instinct" (18). She considers her own demonstration for equal education on the steps of the Cathedral as having been "caught up ... in a tumultuously disintegrating dream of romance" (19). The ending of the protest in violence and then in silence violated a *dream* that there was a "language in which it was still possible to speak of heroes, redemptions, radical transformations...." (19). In her own 'mythical country' there was a place for such words. Her present narrating consciousness in this first recollection centres on the dream that was "ripped apart that day" (19), the "romance" of a self too young to understand that she had been "hoping for something fierily transcendent" (19). Her present self is not spared the shock of the "bland faces" in the crowd which authorised police violence, even though she attempts an ironic distancing from that young self who had aspired to "radical transformations" (19).

Her second recollection of her entrapment in the Cathedral, "When they came for us" (68), is prefaced in the narrative by a memory of her much younger school self at the Youth Action protest meeting, before which she had made and put up posters protesting unequal education. The collection made at the meeting where a few hundred people crowded into the small civic centre was the group's effort at restoring some balance through the buying of books for black and coloured schools. Her parents were living separately by then, and her mother had wanted to come to the meeting with her: she remembers that "something inside me flowered. Partly pleasure; but also,

inexplicably, partly regret" (65), and that after the meeting she could see there was "some kind of pride lurching inside her, but smothered down" 66). She remembers being feverish that night, repressing her desire to run to her father's flat where she would "beat at the door, in my dreams, until he took me in" (67). She says that two years later, when she was at university, it was still Papa that she "hankered" for, "scald[ing]" her mother with her reproaches, "wanting him to save me" (67). The 'nightmare' on the Cathedral steps in this recollection is centred in intense physical detail: the braced position of the man with the Alsatian; the "dark roaring" that "lifted" round them; the burning teargas, "cracking", blinding them as a "solid wave of black", pushing the group into the sanctuary of the Cathedral. Pain becomes a certainty in a world in which suffering has been an abstraction of the Other. As she sees it now, "the world was lost then" (68) because the human act of brutality in the face of peaceful protest was legitimated by the "curious, lingering [crowd]" (68). Such a loss is pre-empted narratologically in her opening pages by the newspaper account of present acts of violence, some years later, where a "dispassionate bystander" relates the "closing in on their victim" by teenagers with stones in their hands (3). The stoning happened on a neglected stretch of road, on which some teenagers had set up a roadblock. Seen retrospectively, the violent scene ("That man sitting in the road, slumped forward in a sick daze" (3)) is one which Anna is complicit in, believing as she does that the children are the only ones who can fight "this war" (176). She records the words used in the liberal Press on the stoning: "Acts of senseless violence only detrimental to a decent cause", and wonders how "sensible violence" would be defined (3). J.M. Coetzee (1992:368) has written of the violent state in which cruelty, suffering and torture are *not* meaningful and cannot be until humanity is restored to society and all acts are judged within ethical paradigms (1992:368). In this second recollection of the storming, Anna as the narrator sees her younger self shocked by the "sensible" violence of the law of the State. Her metaphoricising the closing daylight as the light that "seemed slowly to die down all around us", that "piec[ed] into the lancet windows...for a while" (68), and her queer recollection of the "few embarrassed, rain-bedraggled phlox plants" she noticed on their release from the Cathedral by progressive MP's (69), signifies the dying of colour in the living world of her narrating consciousness (129). Frans tells her earlier that the world had lost its colours for him after his shock treatment, and Anna recalled the way a tortoise beetle, a jewel against the dark leaves of the ipomoea, fades to a dull brown when you kill it (114). The violence which occasions such loss impinges on her historical consciousness as a reality that cannot be refused. In this retelling of the protest, she was "sleepless" that night, conscious only of the "pulsing of fear" (69). In her need to know the (historical) importance of their protest, as she later says (129), she is out when the "first light had hardly begun to thaw from the surfaces of lamp poles" (69), only to read in the early

Press that the "riot" clearly did not refer to police action, hence justifying further state intimidation and brutality on campus the next day (70). In a state of pain and exhaustion she decides to go to her father, out at Hermanus then, in a cottage with Karen, his lover and the subject of *Liefdesverse*. She would have to hitch a hundred and twenty kilometres there.

Her third recollection of the "rite of desecration" (71) is prefaced by her confessing to the anomaly, as she now sees it, of her "faith in loveliness" as a young girl: "Would you believe it if I told you that" she asks (128). But she redefines this double-voiced irony within the constraints of the limited discourse available to her growing consciousness then - that of knowing of the Flower Children but not of the student rebellions elsewhere and particularly in this country in the 1960's. When she now says, "I think that something went wrong when they drove their way into us, armed with those clubs ... We shouldn't have been driven backward like that" (128), she is revising her own loss of faith in loveliness as a consequence of the general anomie she perceives within political injustice. It is significant that her revision brings her to an understanding that "hope" does not reside in "some eternal, ideal domain", in the "strange hush" of painful "brightness" (129); neither should it arise only as an extreme form of resistance to "disciplined brutality" (129), thence to be marginalised by the master narrative (in this context the Press) as "liberal self-indulgence, for white students only" (129). In this retelling - "it still happened, didn't it" (129) - she asserts the necessary function of the subtext as oppositional to the master narrative, and asserts also the importance of recollection: that, in Hutcheon's words, self-reflexivity bares convention (1988:219). The convention demythologised in this instance is that the idea of 'hope' is painful, and not practical: she realises that it does not require "granite and sandstone, wet steps, stained glass, tear-gas, disciplined brutality, carved marble and shocked, surging crowds" (129). This knowledge belongs to a present self transformed by remembering. Anna's younger self had to commit experience to "symbol, language ... knowledge" (130), before she could read time backwards (in Ricoeur's words) through the mediation of her present consciousness.

In Anna's words it is only through reflection that "meaning frees itself and becomes a symbol, a story" (24). It is her acceptance of this process in which, as de Man says, reflective distance separates being or self-presence from language (1983:114) that allows her to re-appropriate truth through reconstruction. Her brother Frans was not able to accept the loss of pre-symbolic, Imaginary wholeness and hence was not able to reconstruct his truths (184). What appears to be a regressive action on his part becomes a symbolic renunciation of life, because he cannot enter the symbolic order of the Other (in Lacanian terms the Father, Law or Language), which is necessary for

inscription into the relational order. As Felman says, the symbolic order is "ex-centric to the narcissistic specular relation of self to other and self to self" in the Imaginary order (1987:104,105). Anna tells us that Frans's experiment with speech after his breakdown was "physically painful" and that his return to or recovery of speech was a "wrench far worse than any anguish of the body: more a sense of infinite loss" which he tried to express and felt embarrassed by (99). Her revision of his "failure of heart" as a failure to narrate himself, brings her to a recognition of the necessary acceptance of loss for entry into signification, and of the redemptive possibilities inherent in narrating the self. Kristeva has written on the "melancholic imaginary", who is unable to accept despair, and whose depression hides an aggression against the lost object (1987:106). In the light of what she says, Frans's renunciation (of signification) takes the form of self-reproach which manifests a hatred directed against the unconscious other. Kristeva writes that the self incorporates an ideal part of the other which then becomes a "tyrannical judge" (1987:106). Furthermore, the sorrow Frans suffers is perceived by him as founded on a fundamental lack within the world, hence he desires to fill that lack by imaginatively creating "an endless store of eternities for humanity" (113). In his shock treatment, when he was convulsed with arching to the point of feeling his spinal cord would snap, he felt that "each time [he] completed one of those arcs" he would be "guaranteeing the existence of another entire universe someday in the future" (113). His "conviction" he confesses to Anna, "was not in words", signalling in Lacanian terms, his inability to repress the specular relation, and enter into the Symbolic substitution of objects of desire. Anna thinks that this failure is the effect of his yearning for a "single grand hypothesis" which would explain the world to him (111), and which in revision she sees as a futile "quest" (184). Her own writing arguably counterbalances the despair: it is Kristeva's belief that artistic creation integrates and consumes despair, and consolidates the ego through allowing despair "to assume an existence upon the basis of its own vulnerability in relation to the other" (1987:121). This is endorsed in Anna's redemption from the sin of unmediated despair in which "[such] despair is the brave excuse for decadence" (184).

As she recalls her brother, Anna initially understands the silence Frans yearned for, and is tempted by it. She:

> can imagine the immense peace that comes from gazing, hour upon hour, at the creatures in the sand; while you keep the burning strength of the sun fixed steadily between your shoulder blades in a balance that nothing, not even the wind or other people's shouting, can shake.(98)

She confesses that "it comes near to my own idea of paradise" (98), even though she knows that Frans went out into the country, and did not come back, "deeply proud" (111) though he had been of working under Dr de Wet in the zoology department at

the museum, and whom he had loved in the way he had loved his father, hurt, even enraged when his presents to him (of insects he had found) were not appreciated as Papa might have done (29). She says that after Frans's first breakdown, when he was found by a farmer who thought he was dead, Constance "confessed" (98), her voice "catching painfully", that after the divorce he would stay in his room, "[a]shamed that people would guess ... he'd been sobbing into his pillow" (98).

Anna finally cannot renounce life, though the ending of her narrative appears ambivalent about her need to head out "across the hard-baked, yellow sand" (185) toward that silence:

> To see nothing but a blurred, constant image of stoniness at my feet - some general system of earth-smeared crystals and wind-eroded pebbles. Sometimes the startling particular - patches where the ground is littered with the broken emeralds of wing cases from buprestid beetles, smashed and discarded by predatory birds. (189)

She embraces life because she wants to know why Frans would not accept "that you have to kill part of your most vivid, richest experience - before you can enter into systematic knowledge" (185). It is this acceptance of the loss of the Imaginary as necessary that allows her to re-enter history and accept pain and suffering as the basis for the search of knowledge and truth.

That she thinks in terms of the death of the Imaginary as "inaugurat[ing]" knowledge, attests to her revision of the necessary construction of self and of truth within social and political realities. Both Menán du Plessis and Linda Hutcheon have written about the constructedness of knowledge or truth as a "materialist" praxis. Hutcheon posits that "the past [is an] object of knowledge" (1988:213). In her essay "Towards a True Materialism", du Plessis examines her own concern with "idealist myths of transcendence" (1981:87) present in the self-sufficiency of realism, and posits instead the deconstruction of ideology or discourse in the materialist construct of the past. Anna Rossouw for her part values the "estrangement" between "inner and outer realities" (43), which we may take to mean the awareness of one's speaking self as a discursive subject always in process. She recognises this element of process in her father's observation that explorers "stumble" on other cultures "at 'critical' moments in their history" (105). This process endorses a materialist view of knowledge in which du Plessis sees revelation, and by inference construction, taking place in every present moment (1981:80). Narratologically, the mode of her writerly narrative constructs Anna's subject position as a site of struggle and process. We can see the way Anna thinks about this process as a constant revision and re-constitution of truth, in her idea that "it must be possible to grasp at words the way you can scrape up a handful of pebbles and dry grass from the ground, bruising your knuckles" (96).

2.6 Deliverance from the Myths of a Nation

In her position as a confessant and as an unsettled subject Anna seeks to redeem herself from implication in the "myths of a nation" which she sees as a dyad composed of private fear and collective fear, and from which there is "no hope of deliverance" (118). The "myths of redemption" that seem to sustain totalitarian societies only serve to "suspend" the psyche, she argues. Levi-Strauss proposes, as Eagleton puts it, that "myths ... reduce any particular consciousness to a mere function of themselves" for which reason "myths think themselves through people, not vice-versa" (1983:104). Anna's use of the word "deliverance" is I think intended to reveal the complicit relation of self and collective self based on the fear of contradictory possibilities. Because myths function as imaginary resolutions of social contradictions (Eagleton 1983:112), the self is likely to accept the organizing principle within the myth, which structures reality in a finite way, in J.M. Coetzee's words, a "way of patching things together" (1992:119). It is in this complicity that Anna sees the "danger" (118), and says earlier in her writing that she is afraid to be a fool and allow herself to be swept up in "the unthinking, populist drift" (15) of various political and social standpoints. Her disavowal as "horrible" of the social phenomenon in which "common beliefs sustain your own personal myths" (21) reveals her fear of the relational order where the self is understood only in relation to external social realities. It is an order which Axthelm believes perpetrates the self's dependence on something outside the self through which to mediate self-knowledge (1967:129). In the light of postmodernism's historical and political referents which relativise the subject, Axthelm's placing of the individual outside or beyond the constraints of such realities can be seen as ahistoricist, a structuralist elision, or it can be seen as ethical, affirming the individual above the collective. The contradiction disclosed in Anna's desire for a seemingly ahistoricist position (perhaps an ethical one) is clear in her criticism of her brother as "absolutist ... Unwilling to work within a particular society...." (20,21). We are to infer from this that she desires to work *within* a particular society, which means a conscious opposition to constructing one's own myths. The private myth would be a return to the romantic idealism she later rejects for its significant lack of commitment to a changed world (171). Before such knowledge is revised as her truth, however, self-knowledge is bound by her fear of language as a myth, an "obsolete, burned-in circuitry", a "prison" (22). Like the earliest people who made of an utterance something absolute, she fears that between words and objects, between signifier and signified, there is a nothingness that cannot be breached unless by a "bleeding gift" (of her self, she does not add) (22). If I am right in reading this gift as her bleeding self, then Anna is afraid that the self she offers will only ever be "conciliatory" before a stronger power, and will not be her true

self for whom words and whose words would be transformative and redemptive because ethical. It is worth quoting at this point the fear that paralyses her early subject position, when she tries to reach the anxious and timid child whose need for a hug she had misread, by offering him the mayfly she had found on the hike they were all part of:

> That offering - I suppose it was meant to be conciliatory. Isn't that what people do? You volunteer some fragment of yourself or any kind of substitute: in recompense. The way a lizard will shed its tail....
> In extremity I suppose one might offer up anything, or anyone. Anything to spare yourself from the vision...of a man's torso rising above you ... while his right arm is drawn back. (33)

This is the very dyad of fear evident to the narrating consciousness transformed through the recognition that any *social ethos* "has to institute itself through a constant, iterative communion of violence" (166), and that resistance to that violence is grounded in a *private ethics*, in wanting to understand why there are "no longer meanings to comedy or tragedy" (176), in contesting a world in which heroes are murdered (167) and in which the child's "small body bleak and fractured...." lies somewhere in a state mortuary (176).

2.7 Separation from the Father

Anna had supposed violence to be an "unspeakable deadlock" (22) which only the intermediary of an imagined third person could end, hence releasing the fearful self into the "real world" (22). She had seen this third person as her father, whom she had invested with "The Answer" and to whom she went with demands that "he never seems to have understood" (62), "wanting him to save [her]" (67). This desire to be saved is one she retraces from childhood as a transgression akin to Romanticism with its desire for "a self-enclosed unity" (171), and akin to the Christian myths of redemption (118) through (enclosed) unity with the trinity. In her aloneness as a child she desired symbolic oneness with her Father. Oedipal separation from her mother, in the form of dreams of suffocation while her mother's voice "echoed colosally" around her (92) marked the child Anna's entry into the law of the Father. But it was an entry troubled by her fear that the "special way of meaning" that words had for her brother, and by implication for her father, was "lost to [her] from the beginning" (96). An early memory of their enclosed unity from which she suffered exclusion and which assumed a mythic status, is to be found in one particular walk on the beach, Frans and Papa striding, her small self running after them and stumbling. One particular incident displaces her, leaving her "stranded, [her] face burning in the wind":

> Frans and Papa were far ahead of me when they began their great outcry of discovery. Heard Papa calling 'Frans, Fransie, kom kyk gou, dis 'n...'. The blown, salty sand in my mouth smothered the rest of his words from me. The two of them moved closer together; both gazing down at something that lay in the debris of wrack strands, gull feathers and the dark strings of bluebottles. I rushed up across the sand; thinking [the present consciousness realises] that I might steal a way into that companionship....
> 'Ag, Antjie.' Papa murmured. (95)

She says that she tried staring down at the dead fish in the same way that Frans had done but that she "couldn't see what it had meant to him or Papa". That evening she remembers "I was flustered, with an ache in my chest, and had to have an aspirin crushed for me in a teaspoon of jam" (95).

The ache in her chest, her heightened awareness of her bones, become a leitmotif for pain as a passive response to exclusion and to loss, as does the singing in her ears and the raging thirst. All responses are founded on her desire for a "counter" to the "nightmare" of loss, a desire she projects for the children she shelters as a father's "lips in your hair and his fingers moving lightly, amazedly over your forehead, your cheekbones" (87). She understands this love as a symbolic rendering of the child's self back to itself, that without such "surrender", such love from the father, the self has no premise for knowing that a dialectic of being demands the counter, the checking, if it is not to be self-enclosed. The dreams of anarchy, the "bloody tide" (158) that Felicia propounds, are, Anna believes, the order of a "frenzied romanticism" (86), a self-enclosure which has known no surrender of love. Parental love is a relational order that Anna fiercely believes in; she says insistently that you cannot abandon children (11,94,170), that fatherhood is "an abiding" (185). The form of her abandonment has been the "terrifying moment when there was nothing between us at all; nothing to cover up the singing, black space of our strangeness to each other" (48) in the moments she purposefully sought out her father, in the flat on his own, and in the cottage with Karen. She hid her yearning for his words with her offers of poems she had written, her awkwardness with him showing a repressed need for more than his "brief smile" and his polite and earnest advice that "you must decide for yourself what you want" (48); she hid her distress at his calling her Anna instead of Antjie (72). She fears that their estrangement is the cause of her insistent need for Papa's "gestures of concession", which she "loudly demand[ed]" as a child (95,96), a need that Frans was free from. Neither can she imagine inclusion in a "language of wordless delight" she had observed, from her vantage point of stiffness, between her mother and the small boy Frans with his "unconscious tenderness" towards her (98). The last time she seeks out her father, following her entrapment after the student protest, Anna sees her

father without seeing her anxious self in him: "He had that drained, expressionless look he wears whenever any violent emotion is seething inside him. Unaware, perhaps, that the very stillness of his face is far from neutral" (73). But it is a tenderness she (mis)reads as "tense concern" despite having seen "his elbow jerk slightly" when Karen asked if she had been hurt in the police action, (what Anna later names as the "dense wall of solid-packed, flailing policemen: their boots they used, fists, and those truncheons and even their bodies" (172)). She cannot respond to him; the walk they take in the failing light along the old breakwater of the harbour is tense with unspoken concern and love - Papa calls her Antjie but asks her, "light-voiced, almost quizzical: 'Well Antjie, what brings you out here?'", and Anna is "blinded for a minute, tasting salt" (74). She says that she answered him in his own tone, frantic, we may read, in her desire to repress the sudden and shocking thought of dissociation from the Father: "Papa, Papa, I don't know how to hate you, I love you. But I couldn't speak [the words]: I'm not certain that they even expressed anything like the truth" (74). But we read this as the truth; she gives up, silently willing him to leave her, and in the end does not speak to him at all (75). The younger Anna sought to preserve the self from the ache for comfort, for absolution, by justifying her own distancing from her father as "I couldn't begin to explain: not in any way that would satisfy Papa - clear, definite sentences with endings; elegant logical relations" (75). We realise retrospectively that this is a precursive death and rebirth into her search for her own voice.

She is released from the mythic dyad with her father, through a dream she remembers of her father, and through a revision of what his poems mean to her in her present narrating consciousness. The particular dream, one of many nightmares in which her father stood over her, baton in hand, is one in which she holds the knife over him. In the dream she is on the periphery, a tiny "corner of consciousness" (130). She is one of a "horde" from this "peripher[y] of language", waiting on the poet/sage figure of her father. His disciples fuse with him in what she recalls "a sickly sweet miasma of love" (130). At the moment she becomes aware that she is part of that circle, she "drag[s]" herself away, back to consciousness, but not before she realises that the figure holding the knife over him is herself (130-131). Her narrating self places the dream in 1973 or 1974, the years of intense striking in this country and the fall of the colonial power in Mocambique; or in 1975, her honours year and the year her father was awarded the prize by the Akademie for his collection *Sprakeloos*. She recreates the dream within the context of her own painful self-doubt regarding her historical position in a time when constancy in this country led to incarceration or death, or to enslavement to those more powerful, or to the "hysteria" of soldiering (170). It is significant that she desires to "kill" her enslavement to her father, and return to her own if small corner of consciousness, hence to find her own voice. Her revision of this

dream is part of the process which marks her re-entry into history with her own voice and language, and not as "speechless". Susan Gardner (1984:86-87) sees her symbolic entry into history through the accident with the pane of glass, a death-rebirth symbol inaugurating an emergent Anna, and points to her avowed position of commitment as endorsing this entry: "I can't help feeling that a phase has ended, and that now we have to stay put - to face our historical condition" (171).

In her father's poetry, emerging from the violent consolidation of apartheid in the 1960's and from a time when "the new Romantic artists were rejecting what they called society" (164), Anna seeks a tenable role for herself and for writers in a history in which liberals can no longer dispraise the State for "the grossness of their own ennui" (136). Her father's position in the hegemony is a problem she is only aware of once she revises her past; as a student she feared his evident reserve about agitprop, "sick with doubt" that his oppositional voice was restrained to the mark on the ballot sheet (25). She is able to say later of his political position as a poet that as a new Romantic he was speaking for his own time after all, and that his concern with self-referentiality in language and with the "incorrigible state of consciousness" (185) that he could not escape was part of a modernist distrust of action. She now accepts his disillusionment, of which she had been unforgiving, seeing him as "too perceptive to set much store by socialist utopias" which she believes "are dreamt up by sad, alienated intellectuals out of an inner discontent" (185). If she disclaims idealism at this point, the obverse of which is disillusionment - a passive longing for another kind of world - she disclaims it as a lack of trust that "his children would grow up in authenticity" (184). The retrospective gaze of the narrator and reader alike must surely place such extreme self-doubt (that it could effect self-imposed exile) within the context of the seemingly irrefutable and inflexible power both of the state and the black liberation movement. In recognising that her father and his contemporaries were looking for an "unrepressed humanity of spirit" (42) she is proleptically dealing with questions levelled at any writer in a time of crisis, particularly with what Chapman is later to call "the liberated zone" in South African writing, in which realism and "the particular social derivations" within injustice and suffering (1988:34-35) can be premised as a politically more correct vision of the mass liberation movements than is the "zone of imaginative possibilities". Anna is able to deconstruct the "committed literature" that Marianne believes in (25), as "realist" (in Chapman's terms "mimetic" (1988:27)) in that it "help[s] to preserve the status quo (1983:25) rather than question it. But she is able to respond to Marianne's distress that people need "to *see* that suffering" (25), and to Marianne's belief that the purpose of writing is to identify and militate against political injustice. As a (secret) writer, Anna inclines to the inference in her father's writing that it is "honest only to speak to your own class" (42). For Anna the revisionary process within "imaginative

possibilities" unsettles codes and reveals necessary contradiction, as is apparent in her own reading of her father's scepticism in *Stedelike Kuns* about the "irrational" fusion between inner and outer realities (43). She finds that irrationality or estrangement a source of value for the reason that art and science arise from such contradiction (43).

One of Anna's concerns is the constructedness of language and the bearing this has on truth. The diegesis of *A State of Fear* is retrospective and allows Anna to re-examine the multiplicity of what Rimmon-Kenan calls "previous discourse, be it anterior literary texts, or aspects of language and culture" (1983:115) in the progressive integration and reconstruction of a truth which will effect her re-entry into history. To this end her father's poetry demands her dialogic interaction with discourse, within an Oedipal construct. Miller (1985:45), Kristeva (in Smith 1987:52) and Terry Eagleton (1983:183) have pointed to the process in which the young writer appropriates and then revises the language of the Father/Author. In Eagleton's words, "the poet, locked in Oedipal rivalry with his castrating 'precursor' will seek to disarm that strength by entering it from within" (1983:183). Anna's self-writing within the confessional and epistolary forms contests the position of the "benignly regretful self-reference" (184) that she perceives her father conceding to, and the position of the Imaginary order with its denial of time (186) that her brother gave into. When Anna defines the particular responsibility of the self: "because of having a human history, because of changing our environment" (187), she affirms the necessary alienation of self from world as a dialectic for "historical advancement" (187). From disjuncture and contradiction - in the gap between signifier and signified - which she calls a "deadly conflict" (164), arises the desire for reconciliation. She imagines that without alienation there would be "a static world of perpetual simultaneity" (186), insubstantial because without consciousness, without the need to "recreate meaning" (24). She finds this principle examined in one of the *Sprakeloos* poems: that it is only possible to recreate meaning because of the empty space (24). The idea is illustrated in the poem through the puzzle with moveable pieces which slide into place, and that the patterning is possible because of the existing space. Without the space the pattern would be fixed, a negation of conflict through closure. Through this precept she formulates her understanding of the "danger" inherent in the (specious) resolution of conflict that she finds romantic idealism is founded on through its belief in utopias. She is also critical of the fixed position of the 'liberated zone', in which images have narrative power because of the use of (mimetic) "symbols of oppositional culture, and confrontational performance" (Chapman 1988:27) as a means to resolving conflict for the perceived greater good of collective liberation. Writing within the liberated zone is an endorsement of the binary Us-Them position. In her response to the *Sprakeloos* poems, Anna sees the possibility of "new worlds" created through utterance that is not answerable to the political referent (24).

Because language is held collectively Anna perceives it to be a construct, a myth, hence what is recreated from experience and history assumes the status of myth (22). Language paradoxically validates "shared dreams and systems of signs", those systems having "no truth in themselves" (166). It is the "teleological fallacy" that Anna wants to understand; she says she is not content "to invoke evil or wrong-headedness, or outright cynicism" (166-167) through use of language which validates untruth. This approaches the notion of 'behind every myth, another myth' in the attempt at disclosure of an absolute truth. She examines the "fallacy" through the collection *Glas het g'n kristalstruktuur*: despite the apparent rigidity of glass, it is a liquid (104), that despite its formation through fusion of crystalline structures, the process finally admits no such molecular pattern. Similarly language is an arrangement of particular structures which through fusion are destabilised to create new patterns. Anna desires to see the "constant system of patterning in the under-tow of a world myth, along with the cultural inheritance of realised, unique patterns at the *breaking surface* of that myth...." (103, emphasis added). The point at which the (socially) unrealised patterns break through the myth and destabilise it, functions symbolically as the deconstruction of realism examined in *Glas*, and examined in her own image of the way heroes in any society see the conflicting dreams of their society as "visible cracks" in the glass structure of the myth (148). In *Glas* her father invokes the ambivalent status of glass to suggest both the fluid relation between the individual and society (121) through the mediation of language; and the strength in that relation because of an ordered system of signs (121). Realism likewise attains an ambivalent status: between the conflicting visions of the first and second person -"I" and "You"- exists the vision of the third person, of "things as they are" (120). Language functions as the "common vision of the world" and takes its position in the "gap" that "you" and "I" have "translated into words" (121). This position of the Word as the "Thirdness" between two subjects, is, as Dovey points out, the Lacanian Other as the locus of speech in which the two subjects are constituted (1988:28). Language is perceived by both Anna and Anton, as a source of strength and as a source of oppositional heroism, since the gap between the signifier and signified must be filled through creation of and revision of reality. In language lies the reconciliation of the private and the public.

Anna recognises that it is language that effects entry and re-entry into history. She says of her father and the Symbolic order both, "Your thoughts have found their way into me, I know" (188). The Imaginary order in its specular relation of self to self and self to world, must be refuted for Fatherhood, which is a social function, an abiding. Through the law of the father, the self is surrendered to itself through reconciliation of self with other. Anna is able to say of her brother's abandonment of such desired

reconciliation (the position of romantics) that "We're human beings: survivors of floods, catastrophes and even our myths; ja, we're living and responsive; and answerable. No survivor ever finally escapes the wordless, ghostly memories of others" (173). Her movement has been from passively responding to loss and to exclusion - her own transgression - to desiring truth through resistance to idealism. Conflict manifests the life-affirming Eros principle, which Anna positions in the unconscious, where the "still-born twin of the soul lies trapped in permanent, living nightmare" (164). It is the resistance of that soul to the nightmare that allows for "transformations, dialectic, redemption" (164). Her transgression had been to want The Answer; her redemption lies in her active resistance to the Answer, to death effectively. When she says "there's a last, perhaps saving feeling that Papa is the one person I must never begin writing to" (62) she accepts that any answer represses the spirit, and that it is conflict with rather than concord with the Symbolic order that generates the search for knowledge and truth. It is the principle behind the paradox of the "fortunate fall".

CHAPTER 3: J.M. Coetzee's *Age of Iron* (1990)

3.1 Confessant and her Visitant

The homodiegetic narrator-confessant of J.M. Coetzee's *Age of Iron* (1990) is Elizabeth Curren, a retired lecturer in classics who is dying of cancer. Her narrative is in the form of an extended, confessional letter to her only child, a daughter in self-imposed exile and lost to her. In her letter she bears witness to the violence of a country that is beyond its term, and, effectively, witness to the "failure of love" that Coetzee believes underlies the lack of reciprocity in relationships in this country (1992:97). She witnesses to her own efforts to lift herself, unaided if need be, from the "pit of disgrace" (107) that for her constitutes the apartheid South Africa in its State of Emergency which she is complicit in. It is because of her complicity that she desires redemption, confessing, "I do not want to die in the state I am in, in a state of ugliness. I want to be saved" (124-125). As I will show, her writing and her words of exchange create the discursive space for a relational, maternal order founded on mercy and "home truths" alike. That is, an order or an age in which the humanist imperative of 'fellow-feeling' is tempered by the revisionary, accusatory mode. Her narrative becomes the symbolic analogue of a dialectic of love - an 'embracing to be embraced' - and finally, more than an analogue - a mode of action that transforms the praxis of historical process.

The month of her journey toward redemption and death inscribes her into history in a subject position "hungry with love of this world" (16). She says: "How I long, just once more, to put on crisp underwear smelling of the sun! Let me be granted just one more summer-afternoon walk down the Avenue amid the nut-brown bodies of children...smelling of clean young sweat" (51). Her journey necessarily inscribes her into an order of, in Menán du Plessis' terms, *kairos* rather than *chronos*, in which "revelation seems to take its place in every present moment" (1981:80). No longer able to justify her exclusion from her South African context in terms of a life "made worthless" by those in power (107), she must accept that "Power is power...It invades one's life" (107) and that it is her complicity in this rhetoric, rather than the hegemony itself, that she desires to redeem herself from. In the mode of an allegory, her (possible) redemption is occasioned by visitations she cannot ignore, dispensed through historical realities that impinge on her subject position, and which may of course be read as divine instruction: the knowledge that she has been "betrayed" by her body into preparing herself for death (11); the keen awareness she has repressed: "I cannot live without a child. I cannot die without a child" (127); the "visit" of Vercueil who "stirs" the pool of her mind, without which there would be "stillness, stagnation" (74); the *amor matris* of Florence, her domestic worker who can accept that for all children

involved in the struggle for black liberation, "there are no more mothers and fathers" (36); the deaths of Florence's teenage son Bheki and his friend John through blunt police action while the boys are, so to speak, protected by her home, and to whom she had appealed with a doctrine of mercy; the appearance of Florence's brother Mr Thabane, who leads her into Guguletu - into Dante's Hell, and the abyss of Babi Yar made real; the visions, dreams and anagrams that present themselves to her, often in nightmares induced by Diconal, the drug for her pain. In each of these visitations she is enjoined by her other, oppositional self to examine the precepts of mercy, of heroism, of love. The last vision she has of Florence, striding through Borodino, field of slaughter, with her daughters Hope and Beauty, does not point to a 'softer age' when it is possible to say "this is how life should be" (40). Instead she is Aphrodite of an earlier time, a "figure of urgency, of cries in the dark...of blood and earth, emerging for an instant...passing" (163-164).

Elizabeth Curren begins her writing on the day of the "annunciation" (4) of her death, symbolised for her in the figure of the homeless and bird-like Vercueil who, unbidden, takes up residence with her and whom she regards as the "first of the carrion-birds" (4), and later as her angel (12). The "ragged stranger" (13) becomes her confessor, the "one to whom I speak my heart, whom I trust with last things" (74).

When Elizabeth first writes of Vercueil, she is faced with her own dissolution, with the abject, the "unclean" and with what is "not to be refused" (3). That she names him her "visitor, visiting himself on me on this of all days" (3), begins a discourse of divine instruction that Elizabeth comes to recognise as a "way of indirection" (74). When she first comes upon him, she expects him to leave. She speaks of "this reconnaissance", the recognition of her own decay, but also of "this other annunciation" (4), the resonances of which are both Biblical and medieval; the word has its root in *nuntius*, a messenger, and we are to infer that the visit of sore affliction inscribes her into a mode of self-examination. Vercueil becomes for Elizabeth "the angel" who is "wordless", whom she in her "sleep of worldliness" must turn to for guidance (153). *Vere* is truth; *ceilidh* is Gaelic for visit; *cueillir*, to gather; *verskuil* is Afrikaans for conceal; and *kuil* in Dutch is a pit. We are prepared for this visit of truth in the figure and discourse of truth concealed, when Elizabeth says to her daughter: "Why do I write about him? Because he is and is not I. Because in the look he gives me I see myself in a way that can be written" (8). The possibility that he is her double lies in the arcane multiple identity or *doppelganger*, which "opens itself to the world and the experience of others" (Miller 1985:21-22). This 'negative capability' both "enhances and annihilates the self" as Miller puts it (1985:22), pointing to the introjection that Elizabeth consciously attempts in her journey toward redemption, and is 'led to' in her relationship with Vercueil, the visitor of (her) truth.

Vercueil is not simply an allegorical construct, but Elizabeth initially writes him into her need to be shown the way to grace, as is clear in her recalling Tolstoy's story of the angel who took up residence with the shoemaker. As Susan Gallagher has written (1991:203), Tolstoy's story "What Men Live By" was intentionally didactic: a destitute shoemaker takes a naked man into his home. The "stranger" (one of the names Miller lists for the various shapes the double takes on (1985:43)), learns the craft and becomes good at it, bringing fortune to the house. The story concludes with the revelation that the stranger is an angel sent to earth to learn what it is that men live by. As Gallagher quotes Tolstoy, the angel asserts that "every man lives, not through care of himself, but by love" (1991:203). This is the story Elizabeth chooses to read, thinking "I did not choose him. He chose me" (11). Vercueil has not left the alley, and appears "from somewhere" (9) when she has her first attack, the pain "hurling itself upon me like a dog, sinking its teeth into my back" (9). His first concern, that a big house, so empty, could be let to students (9), belies his seeming indifference as one of society's "lost soul[s]" (13) to the relational order. As she moves in and out of consciousness in this, her first passage through Diconal, she hears him in the house, and smells him, and thinks wryly, "Not an angel, certainly. An insect rather", in the way he emerges in the safety of the dark to forage (12). She knows she trusts him when, on their drive, in a moment of fearlessness she coasts down Wynberg Hill with her eyes shut (she thinks they are shut). His dog whines with excitement, and she looks aside at him, only to see him "relaxed, imperturbable" : "'Good man!'" she thinks (14). This unbidden 'letting go' releases her - or he releases her - into talking more freely than she was wont to do, and into giving into the tears that overcome her, and surrendering to "wails without articulation" (17). He becomes a "circler-around", as she later says of him (128), attending her constantly in her passage toward death, silent when she wants him to confess her, to ease her discomfit, rendering her back to herself, so to narrate herself. Through Vercueil she transcends her own fears and self-doubts and misgivings. Her comparison, "My mind like a pool, which his finger enters and stirs" (74), draws a startling and beautiful association with the pool of Bethesda in Jerusalem to which the afflicted came for healing, and "at intervals the angel of the Lord came down to the pool, and the water was disturbed" (*John* 5:4). Thus is her self-writing her healing, her words the issue of a disturbance. She says: "He, Mr V, to whom I speak. Speak and then write. Speak in order to write" (75). Tony Morphet has said of Vercueil that he is an analogue for the creative purpose, "a creator and sustainer of spaces around the other figures" (1991:3), and indeed, the classicist that Elizabeth has been learns a different language, that "[b]y indirection I find direction out" (74) - a "roundabout" and "yielding" way through the unlikely figure of one "who drinks and makes allowances" and "softens the rule" (75).

3.2 The Law of the Father and a Mother's Truth

As Elizabeth begins her writing, she resolves to "take [her] leave without bitterness" (5), and also that it will be "home truths, a mother's truth" (5) - that of embracing her child to be embraced "in the arms of the future" (5) - that will be carried over through Vercueil into her daughter. As her narrative unfolds, however, and concomitantly her last days, her self-writing further awakens, in Coetzee's terms, the "countervoices" in her other self (1992:65). She confronts the Law of the Father, founded as she sees it on "exclusive" rules: "death-driven male constructions" (137) which inform both black and Afrikaner nationalisms - the present age of iron, and its progenitor the age of granite - and which have undermined the process of true signification. Furthermore, she publicly contends for an ethical basis that proceeds from the knowledge that "blood is precious ... held in commom, in trust, to be preserved" (58). She is aware that her position as an oppositional voice is relativised by the shame of a life spent "getting over the worse" (115) in a country "prodigal of blood" (57), and that politically her voice is "no voice" (149). The shame she has endured from a lifetime's accommodation of power legitimated in her name has, she believes, its issue in the cancer she now bears (132). This "parody" of motherhood (59) can be seen as metonymic of the maternal order travestied through the bearing of "warrior-sons for the nation" (46). Thus is the death drive of nationalisms evoked in the "[m]onstrous growths, misbirths" (59) that hollow her body from within, "implacably eating their host away" (59). When she counters her dark angel, Mr Thabane - who visits upon her a sight of violence in Guguletu to which she can "never close" her eyes again - with the knowledge that "[i]t lives inside me and I live inside it" (95), she admits she has been blasted (meta)physically by the contagion of a world burning without and within. Against such a world, Elizabeth Curren desires to recover the maternal order of introjection, both for her own salvation, and for that of an age which she perceives is founded on binary oppositions.

The world in which Elizabeth Curren finds herself at the time she begins her writing is Cape Town and Guguletu of 1986: the State of Emergency instituted the year before to contain and suppress unrest *within* the townships has created of Cape Town a city state transcendent in its smooth disavowals of dissidence. In order to sustain the myth of the master narrative, the Press is censored, and what Elizabeth knows about Guguletu depends on what Florence tells her, and on what she can learn by "standing on the balcony and peering north-east: namely, that Guguletu is not burning today, or, if it is burning, is burning with a low flame" (36).

Elizabeth's position as she begins writing is avowedly liberal humanist: she deplores the patriarchal ideologies (of late capitalism) which discount the importance of ethical

paradigms, and which she sees manifest in the children of the colonisers and colonised alike, in their interested self-preservation. She writes of the gangs as "[c]hildren scorning childhood, the time of wonder, the growing-time of the soul" (6), not yet able to see her error that since the school children's revolution in 1976, and particularly in the Emergency, this 'childhood' is the target of an unprecedented and sanctioned state brutality and callousness. She writes of "their white cousins soul-stunted too" in the "limbo" of "ballet lessons [and] cricket on the lawn" (6), "undecided [and] indecisive" (85). Divided by nationalisms, the "cousins" consort uneasily in their denial of love, as Elizabeth perceives it. And a reciprocal relationship, we may take it, is possible only through introjection - through taking into the self the alterity of others, so to experience a oneness with them. This impulse, or reciprocity, can be seen in the Keatsian 'negative capability' (see Miller 1985:21-22), and in Kristeva's belief that it is only in allowing the other to become symbolically part of the self, that love is truly possible (see Lechte 1990:32). Unlike the young Anna Rossouw, who can only mourn the child, Felicia, she could not yet love ("my hands were burning with the scented, smoky richness of her hair that I have never touched" (1983:159)), as Elizabeth Curren repositions herself in her social and political realities, she strengthens her own liberal humanist regard for the importance of the relational order, for love effectively. This is borne out in the process of her affiliation with Vercueil, with the children of "unfreedom" (150), with the maternal order, and with the unconscious as the repository of a truth and knowledge repressed in the symbolic order because of the transgressive and disruptive possibilities of a language that is outside and beyond rules. Her affiliative connections can be seen as a movement from the failed idea of patriarchy to the possibility of a new system of relationships. This transition from "filiative relationships" is a process that David Attwell constructs from Said's understanding of the way changes are effected within and by a culture. Attwell proposes that in his fiction, Coetzee participates in such a process: against the historical narrative, Coetzee "casts in relief configurations of language - conceived as subjectivity, self-representation, myth, ideology - which contain different accounts of the limits and possibilities of life lived out in history" (1990:117-118). Elizabeth Curren restores to history those social discourses which have been marginalised by the Law of the Father and by her own filiative connections with the hegemony as one of its (discomfited) tribute-bearers (this name that she uses for the Afrikaners (59) must be seen to compromise her own historical position as a teacher in a white university with the privileges that attend the tax-payer). Where Terry Eagleton proposes that the relational order of freedom and democracy is "limited" and "not concrete" (1983:207), Elizabeth believes a return to the 'softer ages' is possible through parental rather than political engagement. It is the "dialectic of love" that Anna Rossouw tentatively proffers in *A State of Fear* (1983:87), and which Elizabeth Curren undertakes to renew through her words and her writing, which she imagines entering her daughter and

"draw[ing] breath" (120) through her reading this letter of "truth and love together at last" (118). She has, as a classicist, the memory of myths to sustain her, and she has her own memory trace of the semiotic dyad of mother and child she experienced both with her own mother, and with her daughter. These memories militate against the abjection of the maternal order from the discourse of patriarchy, itself symbolised in a vision she recalls of this benighted country: "'Father, can't you see I'm burning?' implored the child, standing at his father's bedside. But his father, sleeping on, dreaming, did not see" (101).

The Law of the Father, or the symbolic order, is rule-governed, founded on the epistemological primacy of the Word, in the Judaeo-Christian tradition, and of rational consciousness, in Cartesian terms. Western liberal humanism emerges as a dissident sub-text within patriarchal discourse in that the ideal of a democratic (relational) order is founded on the ontological basis of alterity. Where the paternal order seeks to codify truth in unitary and monistic terms, the maternal order of liberal humanism makes provision for otherness or difference as part of truth. It would be fair to say that liberal humanism destabilises the binary oppositions of patriarchal discourse, in which certain terms are privileged, and proposes instead an interactive process of differences. 'Otherness' rather than 'othered' hence becomes the mobilising imperative in the relational order.

In her fear of the patriarchal binarism that produces the Enemy, Elizabeth Curren takes to task the terrifying precept on which nationalism, colonialism, and by inference all laws of the Father, exist - that is on the rule: "win or lose", and the only answer allowed in that discourse: "Yes and No" (132). She says to the child activist John, who has taken refuge in her house, that "[i]t is like being on trial for your life and being allowed only two words, Yes and No" (132), and that the call to fight, we may read, is not a fight for life, but a fight for death, since the regenerative space around the 'Or' is closed. Elizabeth believes that through her words and her writing she is fighting for that Or, for what "is living inside me...fighting for it not to be stifled" (133). Earlier, she had spoken to John, in hospital following police action, of what happens to our humanity in time of war, when, as Thucydides wrote (she tells him), rules are followed and people are killed "without exception" (73), and how "[m]ost of those who died felt, I am sure...that, whatever the rule was, it could not be meant for them" (73). She tells him that "given time to speak, we would all claim to be exceptions" (73), and that the lack of mercy which denies that - what we may see as the disruptive possibilities of the oppositional voice - arises from a disregard for the importance of "close listening" (73-74). She says later to her daughter of Vercueil's story about the way he lost the use of his hand at sea, that "[t]here is no lie that does not have at its core some truth" and that "[o]ne must only know how to listen" (171). In this way she fights for the "deep-down

stirring of knowledge" (133) so easily abjected by the law of he Father. Such knowledge challenges the framework of binary assumptions, and exposes its basis as ideological only, hence it is othered and even stifled. In fighting for those words which come from her "heart", her "womb", she says that she is like those Chinese mothers who know that the daughter born to them will be taken by someone who will "pinch... the little nose to" (133). She says of this (his)story to the young John that there is just a "tendril" of difference between the girl and boy, "[v]ery little to make the difference between life and death. Yet everything else, everything indefinite, everything that gives when you press it, is condemned unheard. I am arguing for that unheard" (133-134).

The unheard that Elizabeth takes as her province can be understood as that which threatens the apparent unities of the patriarchal order or master narrative. She plies John with images of the way the life impulse and mercy are stifled by the dominant discourses of power, and even confesses to him, a child, her own shame: "from self-loathing the body turns malignant and begins to eat away at itself" (132), so that she can compel him to believe that our duty must be to the *life* within us (133). She fears that John, in following a "flagstaff, a gun" (134), believes he is engaged in life, and tells him: "What an error you are making!" (134). He has at this point been in hiding, having made his way secretly out of hospital in a bid for self-preservation. As an activist, or more simply a black teenager, he knows he is not safe there. Elizabeth recalls Bheki's words to her when they were told by a hospital orderly that there was no record of John's having been admitted after their "accident" with the police, that: "They are all the same, the ambulances, the doctors, the police", to which she had said "nonsense", and Bheki had "smiled a smile not without charm, relishing this chance to lecture me...the old woman...who had no children and didn't know what to do. 'It is true,' he said - 'listen and you will hear'" (61).

3.3. Inscription into History

Bheki and John's own violent insertion into police brutality with its repressive order of the "dark chamber" (Coetzee 1992:361), against which their helplessness is writ large, inscribes Elizabeth into the political reality that is the Emergency, and demands from her a revision of what constitutes morality. Before the crucial incident, to which I will later return, Elizabeth's writing to her daughter can be seen as a retreat into language in the way that it was for her literary forebear, Magda, in Coetzee's earlier work *In the Heart of the Country* (1978). Maes-Jelinek has said of Magda's confession that it "is both a substitute for action" and a desire "to transform her existence through a new vision", "aborted" though that is through "her failure to enter into a dialogue with others" (1987:90-91). In the early days of her writing Elizabeth examines the "stupor of

power" (25) that has made the Afrikaner nationalists careless of even an interested legitimacy. In an admission of her loathing for "them", Elizabeth regards the "locust-horde" as: "Untroubled by the stench [of death]" that issues from their rules (26). In a grotesque parody of a patriarchal Calvinism she sees the unrepentant "new Africans" "[p]ressing downward" with "[h]uge bull testicles", "[p]lotting against each other too" (26). In what becomes a terrifying exposition of the way "the word" can etymologically "turn people to stone" (26), she shows how rulers can become stupefied by the "virtue" of an unchanging message: "from *stupid* to *stunned* to *astonished*, to be turned to stone" (26). It is only when Florence identifies the young black activists as "good children, they are like iron, we are proud of them" (46) that Elizabeth must consider "what, after all, gave birth to the age of iron but the age of granite?" (47).

Elizabeth does enter into dialogue with others, and therefore into history, as she attempts to exact from those who oppose her the cognizance that "[t]here are no rubbish people. We are all people together" (44). She begins to deal with the age of iron as a process which can be challenged through a dialectic of love, and of parental love. As Magda proleptically asks, "Where, unless compassion intervenes, does the round of vindictiveness end?" (1978:130), so Elizabeth is able to say to the mother Florence: "What kind of parents will they become who were taught that the time of parents is over?" (46), and that if Florence admires her son's generation "because they are afraid of nothing" (45) she is indeed giving her children over to a "regime of death" which laughs at "a woman on fire" even as she "scream[s] for help" (45). When Florence accepts that she did not think she would live to see "such a thing", but that "It is the whites who made them so cruel! Yes!" (45), Elizabeth secretly charges her with complicity with the "witch-hunters of both armies" (47) by saying to her that she has turned her back on her children (46). Florence denies this, but in her use of the collective *we* ("are proud of them") she effectively becomes the "Spartan matron", the "dogmatist" (46,47) in Elizabeth's vision of the ages without mercy and without love - the ages both of iron and of granite. By 'love' we may take to mean the "limits" that are set (46), when it is not sanctioned by parents that children are the "guardians of the people" (42). In her distress and anger that Bheki and John could kick and beat Vercueil because he is a 'good-for-nothing', we may understand her vision of the softer ages, as a cycle not premised on the binary principle of self-preservation through the unmerciful distinction of the other as lesser.

Elizabeth allows herself to create a softer age in which Florence and her husband, having put the children to bed go for a walk in the "warm dusk", just the two of them, and "[speak] about the past week, about how it had been" (39). She says, "All of this happened. All of this must have happened" (40), in what strikes the reader as her own intense longing for a mythic, unmediated joy. It is a death wish for the oneness of

being which motivates, in different ways, the utopias of the revolutionary and liberal alike. Elizabeth resists death, however, and her narrative stands as a testament to her "resolve" (111) "to stand life, to hold out" as Freud named the Eros principle (Hughes 1985:41). This is evident in her duty to the words within her, for which she has to forego the easing of pain: "So without pain no writing: a new and terrible rule" (159) against the "shaft of light" the drug offers her, before the "darkness redoubled" in which she writes (169). This clinging to life in the face of death is, we read in *Revelations*, the triumph of the blood of the lamb (12:11). Elizabeth says "my duty is to the life. I must keep it alive. I must" (133), and this positions her at the interface of the two ideologies of black and Afrikaner nationalism, each the obverse of the other's cruelty. Her affiliation with the children of iron emerges from her growing regard for Florence: "Florence is the judge. Behind the glasses her eyes are still, measuring all" (129), and from her induction into what it means to fight for the life of a child: "Who is he to me that I should nag him?" she says of John, "Yet I held closed his open flesh" (130). Her love for these unlikely children realises the maternal bond that Anna Rossouw shows is outside/beyond the constraint of law, which is that a mother will "put [a child] before all principles" (du Plessis 1983:146).

The police assault on the boys witnesses to the "careless[ness]" (45) that Elizabeth had warned Florence of in this age of revolution, and which she now sees as the power levelled against children. It is significant that the police brutality towards Bheki and John is prefaced by her recalling the way she would wake her daughter for school, "giving myself time to sit beside you and stroke your hair...my fingertips alive with love, while you clung to the last body of sleep" (52). The shocking juxtaposition of the golden childhood, and its inversion, the young militants, is a recurrent image which serves to pull Elizabeth from the preservation of her own myths, effectively from self-preservation in the face of the disruptive call to self-revision.

Elizabeth is outside (having just turned out, with Florence's grieved help, the woman who had followed Vercueil in the night before) when she sees the boys Bheki and John on their bicycle, pedalling down the hill of Schoonder Street, away from the yellow police van. As she watches, the van draws level with the boys and the side door swings out at them. She sees the boy avert his face, "put out a hand to save himself". She hears the thud, a "deep, surprised 'Ah!'" and her own scream (55). "'*This country*!', I thought" (55). She attempts to staunch the "sheet" of blood from the gash on John's forehead, pinching the flaps together, recalling her daughter's cut finger, "our timid thimbleful", and thinks "Child Snowdrop lost in the cavern of blood [at Casualty], and her mother lost too" (57). She says of John that "it was impossible, in my deepest being impossible...[to] do nothing to stop the flow" (58).

A vision comes to her, of the "blood of mankind, restored to itself" in the deep lake of Baikal, its snow-white shores lapped by the "scarlet-black" sea under a wintry sky. This is the blood that is "lent, not given" she believes, a "pool of life dispersed among us in separate existences" (58). Ransomed as we are in the Christian tradition by the blood of Christ, it is notable that Elizabeth at this point denies the possibility of redemption for the Afrikaners, whose blood she sees in "a place apart", enclosed in barbed wire under the Karoo sun (58-59). Her vision of the unredeemed recalls the vengeance of the Old Testament. In the light of the limits she sets on mercy, the point Stephen Watson takes from Koestler is pertinent: "To quarrel with society means to quarrel with its projections in one's self" (1990:47). Her position, "I want to sell myself, redeem myself" (107), symbolises the struggle between Eros and Thanatos in the site of her self; and her writing, as the "foe of death" (106) is the symbolic analogue of the battle against an unrepentant evil. That she sees patriarchal nationalisms as that evil, places her as a liberal humanist in the South Africa of the Emergency. And, in that position, as one complicit in the whole "sorry story" (179). She acknowledges this complicity when she binds the scar of the fifteen year old John with a strip cut from the red tablecloth: "Return covered in glory and you shall have your desire. Gore and glory, death and sex. And I, an old woman, crone of death, tying a favour around his head!" (131).

In their refusal to be at school which "makes [them] fit into the apartheid system" (62), Bheki and John have declared themselves as activists in the Struggle. Elizabeth resists the logic that underpins such a choice, arraigning Florence with "I can't believe you want your son out on the streets killing time till apartheid comes to an end" (62). This rhetoric is part of Elizabeth's charge that she belongs to a world that "barely exists anymore", "as I do not belong, thank God, to what it has become" (65). She says to Vercueil she is comfortable in that world in which if your car does not start, "you get on your bicycle" (65), which we may take to mean a world that is utopian in its ready solutions. In her evasive "I don't see why I should change" (65), she evidences the response to inhumanity which Coetzee sees is inherent in our present society, which is that the choice is "limited to *either* looking on in horrified fascination...*or* turning one's eyes away" (1992:368). The rhetoric explains in part the imperative mood that informs much of her exchanges with the children of unfreedom, and in Anna Rossouw's words, with their "clear-eyed oppressors" (1983:3). In her constant arraigning the nationalists of both sides, she is setting up the mythic past certainly, but importantly, the reciprocal order of humanist values as a way forward for this benighted country. When Stephen Watson writes that the "only tongue the colonialist can speak is the circular one of tautology" (1990:39), he is uncovering, I would like to add, the ethical and didactic imperative of the liberal humanist who, as Jane Gallop says, perceives his/her position as a "redresser of wrongs" (1988:169). Hence the questions Elizabeth Curren directs at

the antagonists, and her injunctions: "listen to what I am saying", "I know what I am talking about", "I warn you", "what do you think you are doing". When she stops before the police in Guguletu, it is with the remembrance of Bheki's face in death - the "sheer childish surprise", and the mouth stopped by a hand full of sand (115) - that she cries out against them. She writes to her daughter that she wanted "to bare something to them" (97), to "bring out a scar...any scar, the scar of all this suffering" (98), and then acknowledges, "in the end my scar" (98). It is terrifying to her to encounter the soul distrained in the representative figure of the young and polite policeman - when she tells him that nothing could be worse than what they are doing in Guguletu, "[w]orse for your souls, I mean", he answers "No". She says that she "had expected incomprehension, but no, he understood exactly what I meant" (98).

If this is Hades (101), Elizabeth must ask who its keepers are. In her vision hell is the "domain of ideas" (101), and ideas, we may infer, are representations of the real inscribed in and through the symbolic order. So it is that we are "stolen from life" (100) in our inception into the symbolic order, and a "doll" is left in our place, living "an idea of life" (101). Without a soul, the reader realises - and this a cautionary tale of Cartesianism and the paternal order - violence and death are also only ideas, abstractions. Coetzee sees violence done to others as violence against oneself, and posits imaginative suffering as a socially transformative act (1992:337). For Elizabeth Curren it is the maternal order that renders the self (soul) back to itself: "I cling not just to the memory of her but to her herself...[i]n blood and milk I drank her body and came to life. And then was stolen, and have been *lost* ever since" (101, emphasis added).

The unction desired from and through the mother attends the journey Elizabeth makes into Guguletu with Florence to look for Bheki. Elizabeth had not expected to follow: "Let me make myself clear, Florence: at the first sign of trouble I am turning back" (83). "Full of misgiving I drove on into the darkness", she tells her daughter (83). Their search for Bheki takes them to a "wilderness of grey dune-sand" (86) and Elizabeth will not wait in the car on her own. In the cold rain and heavy sand her body pounds "unpleasantly" (87), Mr Thabane offers her his arm, and the noise they had heard, "which at first might have been taken for wind and rain, began to break up into shouts, cries, calls, over a ground-bass which I can only call a sigh: a deep sigh, repeated over and over, as if the wide world itself were sighing" (87).

From the outer reaches of "this amphitheatre in the dunes" (88) she looks down into what surely must be read as the pit of the end of the world, and of death by fire and flood: shacks hacked and burning, smouldering in the rain, gangs hurling out women and children who gather possessions to themselves, and everywhere, "sheets of water"

(89). Fleeing with the frightened, screaming crowd, hundreds strong, Elizabeth has "no answer" (90). She falls into the sand, a vision of the little car her only means to "close out this looming world of rage" (89). It is a world she others through her desire for self-preservation: "These people can take many blows, but I, I am fragile" (89), and which retrospectively, perhaps only retrospectively, gives way to grief for the loss of a communal life "renewing itself endlessly through the generations" (100).

The blow she waits for does not come, and Mr Thabane lifts her, as her dark angel, before the court of the people, so to speak: "my business their business" (90), she says as he questions her in her own language, in the "legacy of Socrates". She finds this praxis "oppressive" (91) in what can be read as a moment of revelation - that the truth exacted in Socratic dialogue is only ever specular of the father's law. In an unlikely but successful bid to redeem herself from the untruth of "other people's words" (91) she says to her chorus who chant, "We are listening! We are waiting!" (91), that "I must find my own words, from myself. Otherwise it is not the truth" (91). When she is challenged aggressively by a next possible victim of the violence, she says: "'But what do you expect?...To speak of this' - I waved a hand over the bush, the smoke, the filth littering the path - 'you would need the tongue of a god'" (91). As a teacher of classics and of Latin particularly, she must accede to the self-referential basis in language, and mourn, as she later does, the "intimations older than any memory, unshakable, that once upon a time I was alive" (100), *and* also, like Anna Rossouw, accept that it is only with our inception into language, the symbolic order, and our representation of the inchoate feeling experiences, that we are able to transcend death and to love others. Thus she is able to say to her daughter:

> Now, my child, flesh of my flesh, my best self, I ask you to draw back. I tell you this story not so that you will feel for me but so that you will learn how things are...If lies and and pleas and excuses weave among the words, listen for them...do not forgive them easily. (95-96)

This re-entry into history, which for Elizabeth means a love for others, is problematic and is not without the desire for death (95,96). She has seen the body of Bheki, laid out, in the rain, in the ruin of a hall. But she gets her car started, and charges the police with the transgressions, the "crime" (149) she is now suffering for, even if, in their eyes, she is only "*die ou kruppel dame met die kaffertjies*" (78).

She lapses in her resolve - who escapes madness here? she asks (97,107) - when she considers redemption through setting herself alight in Government Avenue, in front of the "house of shame" (104). It is a vision, anagogic perhaps, that she returns to later, and in her dreams. Following the death of Bheki, on "one of those still winter days when light seems to stream evenly from all quarters of the sky" (104), she asks Vercueil to drive her down to the Avenue. Once there she sees that she can get past the

bollards that head the Avenue, so to roll down in her car, on fire, "past...the tramps and lovers, past the museum, the art gallery, the botanical gardens" (104). The irony that her act might be misread is a possibility she acknowledges to Vercueil. The reason, we may infer, is that public confession and penance can be co-opted by the hegemony by being defined as an act of madness or despair (105). She asks herself/her confessor: "Whose business is it but my own?" (105) in what can be read as her desire to know whether ethical paradigms are defined through personal or collective reconstruction. She writes to her daughter that she meant to go through with it, and that in her preparations, "Let me tell you that I bathed...that I dressed", some "pride began to return to [her body]" (106). Vercueil is "strangely excited" by her rites (106), an early intimation that as her angel of death he has claimed her as his own, his "object" (108). Unsettled by this, she is short with him and wants him to leave her be, "[a]t which he turned away with a look of such childish hurt that I gave his sleeve a tug. 'I didn't mean that,'I said" (107). She resists death, saying "But why should I bear the blame? Why should I be expected to rise above my times?" (107), and concludes that "I want to sell myself" (107), so to absolve herself from the taint of her world. Later when the pain becomes extreme, she says that she has gone over the act of immolating herself in front of the "House of Lies" countless times (128). Her revision of the act discloses to her (what Coetzee calls) the "double thought" that she has thus far repressed in her motive: "*How easy to give meaning to one's life*, I think with surprise" (128-129). As her own confessor she cannot absolve the specious nature of her impulse, "no matter to what rage or despair it answered" (129). She is able to accept that if the "purgatory" of "dying in bed over weeks and months...will not save my soul, why should I be saved by dying in two minutes in a pillar of flames?" (129), Furthermore, such "tricks" with fire, as the act later appears in a dream (163), <u>diminishes</u> the "urgency" (109) of her need both to repent her life of only half-attending, and to make reparation for the "crime...committed in my name" (149). Her incineration would be no more than a "spectacle" (129): "Will the lies stop...Whose life will be changed, and how?" (129). Her desire to be regarded as a "serious person" by Florence (129), and her resolve not to get over the worse this time (115), finally realises for her the imperative that is the basis of her confession, that is, a desire for a reconstituted self and world in which a doctrine of mercy is coterminous with a doctrine of accountable action.

3.4 Confession of "Home Truths"

Both the mercy that underpins the relational order that she aspires to and the accountable action through which she attempts to lift herself from the "pit of disgrace" (107), restore Elizabeth to what has come to be the normative order of 'the embrace'. It is significant that for her, a *mother's* truth is also a "*home truth*" - that is, that the revisionary process is only possible if the truth wounds or is disruptive. If anything,

home truths oppose the "naturalization" process in which, as Josephine Dodd quotes Culler, the "deviant is brought within a discursive order and thus made to seem natural" (1987:160). Dodd regards this process as "an imperialist activity", which we might read as a monistic imperative. Elizabeth's maternal embrace dispraises all that is 'deviant', that is, all that undermines reciprocity, and in this way her home truths become the basis for reconstruction. Thus she invokes cognizance of the deeply repressed shame, manifest in the dialectic of interestedness, which has led to the 'failure of love' in this country. As she acknowledges it, the "shamefulness of that shamelessness" (109) is "part of me, I am part of it" (149), and it is against her erring self as much as it is against the transgressions of others, that her voice of censure is directed.

David Lodge has written of Bakhtin's "doubly-oriented" discourse, in which the discourse of the narrator is aware of some other discourse, or "hidden polemic", against which it defends itself (1990:60,68). It is a category within the dialogic act, in which any speech act is directed toward an Other, and in Bakhtin's words, "provokes an answer, anticipates it and structures itself in the answer's direction" (in Lodge 1990:21). Following this formulation, Elizabeth Curren's discourse, which by her own admission is "of no account" politically (123), is still the "true voice of wisdom" she believes (149), and "with this...this voice that is no voice, I go on. On and on" (149). Her discourse is her liberal humanist defence against the scepticism of Vercueil, against the pragmatic capitalism that her daughter has adopted, against the revolutionary war cry "Freedom or Death!" that the black revolutionaries have claimed, and against the absence of "honour" in Afrikaner nationalism. She anticipates contempt, certainly she provokes it in order to justify her own polemic, which is, in Morphet's words, the "counterforce" of "the embrace" (1990:4). She is effectively, 'staging the contest' that Coetzee believes is so important (1992:250), and which leads her to say, knowingly, that her writings are "[a] certain body of truth...my truth: how I lived in these times, in this place" (119). She is not without irony when she sees the ineptness of the discourses that have written her, through the eyes of the policemen, who are given "a stint in Cape Town to strengthen their self-control in the face of liberal-hummanist posturing" (78) - in this instance, her shame, as she tells them, of one who is "disgraced" and "very directly affected" by police action against the children in the Struggle (78). As she observes through the young John's eyes, and in a moment of distaste against her own kind, the "bleating call" of the whites is "I!" "I!" "I!" (73), and that she "flinch[es]" from the white touch as much as he does when she brushes his hand with her own (73).

But in her deep (defensive) need to believe in life as "the most generous of all gifts" (100), her humanism asserts (her) rule that "[f]or each of us there is a case to be made" (73). Thus she can say to Mr Thabane, "I fear I know comradeship all too well. The Germans had comradeship...and the Spartans [and] Shaka's impis too, I am sure" (137),

when he argues, "My generation has nothing that can compare. That is why we must stand back for them, for the youth" (136-137). She excoriates the notion of comradeship that is a "mystique of death" schooled into the children, "masquerading as what you call a bond" (137), even though he has pointedly said to her (using the pretext of the poor telephone line) that her voice is "very tiny and very far away" (136). She has made the call to him, expecting him (a teacher like herself) to protect the boy John who is hiding in Florence's room, and who has a weapon, she thinks. She later tells the police that she lent her pistol to the boy: "God save the unarmed in these days" (141), but we may read that as a correlative for her (ineffectual) stance against the State in "*Ek staan nie aan jou kant nie...Ek staan aan die teenkant*" (140). It is the only time she uses their language (and as a grammarian she uses it correctly), but her injunction is, she immediately realises, a voice of opposition from the *safety* of "the other side", from the "other bank of the river" (140) that her nearness to death allows her, and which allows her disaffection from "this land" that she no longer loves (111). She has already admitted to Vercueil, through her allegory of the castrated man, that she has tried "to feel the pain of that separation" but is only aware of "a fleeting sadness" (111). Her distress at John's death, however, reasserts her love for this country - her duty to life in the face of death - that she feared she had lost after Bheki's death: "I am talking about resolve, about trying to hold onto my resolve and failing. I confess, I am drowning" she had said to Vercueil (111-112). So with John's entrapment in the room, she does not leave her house, and must bear the strange contradiction in this world she inhabits, where as heavily armed men close in on the boy, one of the men can note of her "sy's amper blou van die koue", and in the face of her screaming at them, and calling to the boy that she would not let them hurt him, a policewoman can wrap her in a quilt, and help her into her slippers with "[n]o sign of disgust at my legs, my feet" (141).

Through her homilies she had tried to save the armed boy from waiting with a "bomb on his chest" so to speak, with the "talisman", the "compass", the "mystic instrument" that would "transfigure" his life and guide him to the "Isles of the Blest" (137-138). Such parodic use of the language that has betrayed him and others for "the future" serves to underwrite the postmodernist concern with language and truth as only ever self-referential and provisional. Elizabeth knows that John is lost and that her discourse has no power to save him, because as a white she has been complicit in silencing the black voice:

> Poor John, who in the old days would have been destined to be a garden boy and eat bread and jam for lunch at the back door and drink out of a tin, battling now for all the insulted and injured, the trampled, the ridiculed.(138)

When in her fright at hearing the warning shot of the policemen, she slaps at the panes of the kitchen window, she is really flailing her child's arms against her own entrapment in discourse, as she did in an early dream she had after witnessing

Florence's pride in her sons's militancy (47). She knows, and John knew, that under the "[l]ies, promises, blandishments, threats" of *her* language, the generations of the unfree before him had "walked stooped" (132).

But it is his cry "Death to talk!", as she imagines his retort to her, that she fights against, pushing at him the image of the other side making "another notch on their gunstocks" when he falls, and only holding back from "exterminating every male child" because of orders "that can change any day" (131-132). It is only after John's death, and after Vercueil has found her under the flyover - the "urban shadowland" she had escaped to in her distress (143) - that Elizabeth revises and confesses to her own position vis-a-vis the position of those in the Struggle. She tells Vercueil that she had blamed Mr Thabane and Florence for their part in a collective disregard for childhood, for not discouraging children from the rite of death inscribed in comradeship (148). She now examines the justness of her assumed right to such an opinion. As a classicist and a liberal humanist, she knows she cannot privilege any judgement that has not been accorded the *kratos* of public consensus, as she says: "Opinions must be heard by others...and weighed", and that Florence "does not even hear me" (148). But we know that for Elizabeth this is the age of iron, the age of oppression and decline, "a war of the old upon the young" (149). Hence she must believe that hers is the "true voice of wisdom", the voice that cries "*save yourselves*" (149). She also knows that she "lost [that voice] long ago" because of her "inheritance" as a Western imperialist in the discourse of oppression and power. Her complicity in this inheritance, becomes another reason for her doubtful right to judgement against the "calls for sacrifice" (149). She says to Vercueil:

> I raged at times against the men who did the dirty work - you have seen it, a shameful raging as *stupid* as what it raged against - but I accepted too that, in a sense, they lived inside me. So that when in my rages I wished them dead, I wished death on myself too. In the name of honour. Of an honourable notion of honour. (150)

Elizabeth historicises herself as a voice "that is no voice" (149), in an age founded on the binarisms of political rhetoric, a rhetoric that does not, as Coetzee sees it, "glance back sceptically at its premises" (1992:394). Hence her raging against the colonial, and later nationalist and revolutionary will to power, carries within it the home truths of the maternal voice that is not silenced. David Attwell has pointed to Elizabeth Curren's marginal position within the patriarchy that "frees her, paradoxically, to speak with extraordinary candour" (1992:11) about the lack of mercy that underpins the ages of granite and of iron, and in which, Elizabeth believes, *caritas* is only a memory trace of the maternal. Her candour furthermore extends to uncovering her own specious desire for honour, problematised as it is by the concomitant desire for transcendence that she

now recognises as a "mistake": "the notion I clung to through thick and thin, from my education, from my reading, that in his soul the honourable man can suffer no harm" (150). She suffers, because shame has been her signifier through which honour is signified: "As long as I was ashamed I knew I had not wandered into dishonour" she tells Vercueil (150). As a consequence, shame had determined (overdetermined) her historical position, and her "confession" to Vercueil (150) reads as a psalm of both personal and collective contrition: "I was ashamed of it. My shame, my own. Ashes in my mouth day after day after day, which never ceased to taste like ashes" (150). This constant reckoning of her desired separateness from evil points to what Susan Gallagher believes is Elizabeth's "cling[ing] to her sense of shame as a means of salvation" (1991:202).

In the "dark wooded space" of the vacant lot that Vercueil had borne her to, away from the flyover, and where she could see the stars (146), Elizabeth says:

> It is a confession I am making here, this morning, Mr Vercueil,...as full a confession as I know how...I have been a good person, I freely confess to it. I am a good person still. What times these are when to be a good person is not enough! (150)

As did Job and the righteous before her, Elizabeth regards 'goodness' as that 'talisman' and 'guide' to the 'Isles of the Blest' that she had perceived in the boy John's idea of heroism, and had forgiven him for. Earlier she had attempted to bear the burden of her physical pain by assailing that righteousness: "Even a dog with a broken back breathing its last at the roadside would not think, *But is this fair?*" (121). She is yet to forgive herself the "naivete" (121) that goodness ransomes a person from pain, and to love the child that she is, in Coetzee's sense that "we are children, unreconstructed ... to be treated with the charity that children have due to them" (1992:249). Vercueil will lead her to that love and forgiveness of self. This confession - in Vercueil's "Arcady", where "[b]irdsong pour[s] down like rain" and her feet are "cold and muddy" (151) - is prefaced by a confession to her daughter in which she is frightened by the closure of what she perceives as her own inept use of the discourses that have written her: "My dearest child, I am in a fog of error. The hour is late and I do not know how to save myself. As far as I can confess, to you I confess" (124). This might be read as the crisis in what Coetzee has called the "middle voice", in which Elizabeth's narrating "I" falters before "the books" that have written her into an expectation of transcendence. Elizabeth still has before her the memory of the heroic age which preceded the *kudos* of the warrior in the age of iron of antiquity. For David Attwell, the hero is "textual", a construct (1992:206); for Elizabeth Curren at this point, the hero is textual only because the language she has cannot accommodate the concept of heroism. It is a word she was chary of using in her lectures, "[a]s one drops one's gaze before a naked man" (151), from "shame" and "respect" before such complete otherness. In this way

she accorded heroism a numinous quality that is beyond representation, a courage that cannot be signified through language. "Heroic status" on the other hand is already part of a signifying chain in which meaning is relativised by, rather than transcends, the historical and political referent. It must be said that the intense self-reflexivity of her narrative situates Elizabeth Curren throughout her writing in the discursive practices of her classicist learning and of humanism, in terms of what Hutcheon refers to as "re-historicising" the past through the "traces, the texts, the facts we construct and to which we grant meaning" (1988:225). From her position of valorising the past, Elizabeth's writing frees her to question its authority, and to acknowledge that her desire for the humanist master narratives is, to use Hutcheon's terms, a desire for "their (illusory) consolations" (1988:191). Hence Elizabeth re-enters history through a confession on heroism and goodness that Vercueil does not hear, but whose precepts she revises, so to constitute herself as an oppositional voice and redeem herself from the binary of heroism/failure:

> Man, I thought...Trying continually to catch up with that moving shadow [of the unknown part of his existence], to inhabit the image of his hope. But I, I cannot afford to be man. Must be something smaller, blinder, closer to the ground. (155)

This grappling with the present is prefaced by her bid to "not fall to pieces now: [to] think only of the next minute" (155), which she knows will bring her into conflict with the police over her solidarity with the young John. She is back in her house, having been without Diconal for the night of her flight into the "urban shadowland". She must now accept the police injunction that: "Nothing is private anymore" (157), because she has chosen to enter the quarrel over legitimate action, in effect has reclaimed herself from her ex-centric position, and disrupted the hegemonic right to power. The phrase "*die dame diè*" in their dismissive reference to her (141) might loosely be translated as the "mad old do-gooder" (97). In her affiliation with what has been abjected by the Law of the Father, she reaches out for Vercueil's hand, "the bad hand with the curled fingers" when, "in quite a different tone" the detective questioning her says to Vercueil "*Wie is jy?*" and then "*In Godsnaam*" (157) at what we must read as his abjecting her finally from (her security within) the patriarchy. When she had screamed at the policeman, "You are the one who is by himself!", in answer to his asking whether she is all right by herself (155), we can infer that without mercy, man is only ever "Alone: *stoksielalleen*" (172). She uses the Afrikaans word purposely to reveal what has been elided in the English, that is the damage to the *soul* that is the effect of the aloneness she sees in a world without *caritas*.

Following this confrontation in which she had declared the boy's need for a pistol to defend himself, she has a nightmare induced by Diconal, in which the name of the

battlefield *Thaba Nchu* comes to her (158). She acts on this "anagram" and calls the Guguletu number to warn Mr *Thabane* against what we might suppose to be his possible detention and death. It is here in the "dead of night", with the page before her, that Elizabeth makes her peace with John, "that sullen boy I never took to" (159). As she waits for the "smoke-flares" of the drug to subside, and for the return of her pain that is the price of clarity - telling Vercueil she is "just waiting for [her] hands to warm up" (158) - she realises, in what may be read as an epiphanic moment, her kinship with the boy. She sees him inside a room, outside of which men wait "crouched like hunters, to present the boy with his death" (159), while he holds the pistol that he believes holds them at bay. As Elizabeth *writes* she is with him, readying herself with him against "the kick that will burst the door open, the torrent of fire that will sweep him away" (159). It is an interval, this writing, a "suspension" before "we face, first he, then I, the great white glare" (160). Because she sees the boy firing his one shot "into the heart of light" (159), she recognises the grace, as Coetzee has said of the Magistrate in his *Waiting for the Barbarians*, in "choos[ing] the side of justice when it is not in one's material interest to do so" (1992:394). Perhaps she sees that dissolution, as it manifests itself in the boy's revolutionary imperative and in her own accusatory imperative, attends the desire for justice. Though the desire for justice leads to death in *Age of Iron* - a bullet between the eyes, or the gnawing from within of cancer - it is the drive of Eros against "thanatophany", the "death to life" dialectic that underpins the "fatherland" (26,47). For the boy it is the gun, for Elizabeth it is the pen that "hold[s] death at arm's length" (106).

Earlier in her writing she sees herself as one of the old men and women "trembling with just fury, taking up the pen, weapon of the last resort" (48) against the indifference to their charge "*In my day*". Elizabeth uses the phrase purposely, "enunciating clearly each old, discredited, comical word" (49) in what, retrospectively, is the beginning of her declared opposition to the "hunters" of children. She tells the policemen, whose van has been noticeable outside her house since Bheki and John's appearance, that the boys have her permission to be there. She sees the glance between them, and must fence the questions that trivialise her: "No, lady, I don't know anything about boys from Guguletu. Do you want us to look out for them?" (49). So, from her untenable historical position, she speaks, she 'has her say'.

Her pen, her writing, and her impassioned censure against cynicism are indeed the 'foe of death', and inscribe her into history as "an avatar of the age of iron" as van Wyk Smith so renders her (1991:103). It is difficult not to turn to the messianic prophecy in *Daniel* 2 at this point, to the five ages represented in the statue of gold, silver, bronze, iron and lastly and importantly, iron and clay. The last kingdom will be set up from the feet of the statue, part iron and part clay: the two "will be mixed together in the seed of

man, but they will not hold together any more than iron will blend with earthenware" (2:41-43). Hence both the yielding and the enduring will constitute this new age, and the one will not be subsumed by the other. Is this what Elizabeth cannot see, and Vercueil can, in their exchange:

> 'You are like iron too,' he said to me.
> A silence fell between us. Inside me something broke.
> 'Something broke inside me when you said that,' I said.(68).

Her narrative is one which "evolves its own paradigms and myths" that Coetzee believes is the province of the novel which is "prepared to work itself out outside...the opposition out of which history and the historical disciplines erect themselves" (1988:3), and hence becomes a rival voice to history. Elizabeth, through Vercueil, challenges the ages of iron and of granite, subverting their myths/constructs from within, through her knowing use of (their) phallic signifier - the pen as weapon - to construct an order founded on both mercy and home truths, both clay and iron. As it is for Anna Rossouw in *A State of Fear*, language for Elizabeth Curren creates "new worlds" (1983:24), it demythologises history and recreates discursive spaces for the relational order. Elizabeth says to her daughter, "I am feeling my way toward you; with each word I feel my way" (120), and so must she also take on the unknown - "a passage that grows darker all the time" (120). Because her writing is her search for subjectivity and truth mediated through the other, rather than through a Cartesian separateness, it becomes her form of redemption. Patricia Waugh writes that the "relational sense of connection to others" should "temper" the desire for autonomy, that without it the autonomous impulse is "suicidal" (1992:204). In her view the desire for transcendence "displaces the possibility of human relationship because it involves no mediation through the desire of the other" (1992:200). The ramifications of relationality are clear, and precursive of a new order, in Elizabeth Curren's writing, in which *her* "truth and love together" (118) find renewal through the "soul" (118) of the (albeit smarting) other. Her extended letter, in its processive form, is furthermore a work in progress, hence is itself open to change and revision. In this regard, John Lechte quotes Kristeva's belief that "the amorous and artistic experiences as two solid aspects of the identificatory process are only ways of preserving our psychic space as a 'living system'" (1990:33).

3.5. A State of Grace

Elizabeth inscribes *herself* into the revisionary process in naming her cancer as "the sickness...slow and cold...sent by Saturn" (59). Saturn is regarded as the great teacher, who counsels man in patience and endurance through the experience of affliction and oppression. He is himself a lame god, and the rubric associated with him/his influence

is 'duty to life', despite his representation as the god of death. Elizabeth speaks of her affliction as "cold, obscene swellings" (59), of herself as a "host" to a "brood" whose hunger she is not able to sate: "There is something about it" she says, "that does not bear thinking of" (59). She knows she must express it; as Kristeva holds, if pain is not represented, the subject becomes that pain (in Lechte 1990:35). Hence Elizabeth names that 'something' as "My eggs, grown within me. *Me, mine*: words I shudder to write, yet true" (59). She names the growths "My daughters death" (59) in what must be noted as her acceptance of the cancer as her own, self-visited, that "wean[s]" her from her body (11,118) and at the same time effects her immersion in "this first life, this life on earth...Despite all the glooms and despairs and rages, I have not let go of my love of it" (11-12). The "bloodless" gnawing of her sickness directs her to the "sacred[ness]" of blood (59). It occasions the duty to the life within her and without, as much as it occasioned her earlier distress that "in times like these", "my attention is all inward" (36). In her misgiving that "[t]he country smoulders, yet with the best will in the world I can only half-attend" (36), she "collaps[es] inwards" as Jacobs has defined the historical consciousness of white writers, in the decade from Soweto to the Emergency, "to a painful preoccupation with self and its problematic relation to external reality" (1989:34).

She doubts her ability to enter the bond of *caritas*:"'Look at me!' I want to cry to Florence - 'I too am burning!'" (36), evidencing her own suppressed fear that she is not deserving of charity and forgiveness. Similarly, she can only "want to be held to someone's bosom, to Florence's, to yours...and told that it will be all right" (37). As a voice of liberal "self-loathing" (132) in this country, Elizabeth is initially undone by her need for comfort, of "someone who longs, if the truth be told, to creep into her own mother's lap and be comforted" (17). In answer to the limits she places on charity, Vercueil's smile and his gnomic response "Who deserves anything?" (19) has yet to be seen by her as the "angelic chanting" she so desires (13) - that in what is given and *accepted* in the spirit of caritas, lies the grace of human love. In Coetzee's belief, charity is "the way in which grace allegorises itself in the world" (1992:249). Susan Gallagher sees Elizabeth Curren's imperative "to earn her own salvation" (1991:201) as a particularly Calvinist response to the notion of original sin, that "one cannot escape responsibility and must find atonement" (1991:200). Gallagher notes that a practical means to atonement is the practice of charity, evinced in Elizabeth's attempts to rescue Vercueil, to assail the police, to help Florence find Bheki, and to undertake to love John. It is Gallagher's contention that her attempts fail, because salvation cannot be earned (1991:201), and that it is in telling her story that Elizabeth is saved, and that she learns one "can accept grace" (1991:204).

John, or Johannes (we are to assume he has rescinded his (Afrikaans) name for the Struggle, in the same way as did Bheki, who was once known as Digby), is Hebrew for

'Yahweh is gracious'. In this allegory of her journey toward redemption, it is through John as I have argued, that Elizabeth learns of their similarity even within their differences, in their shared desire for justice. In his refuge with her - she sees her house now as a place of refuge and transit (124) in the inexorable passage to death that they both must share - she examines her desire for salvation in the face of her inability to love the boy. She does not deny the accusation (from her countervoice) that she had a part in making him unlovable, "unthinking, inarticulate, unimaginative" (123), but at the same time does not (will not, cannot?) believe it (124). The process of negating herself, so to enter the consciousness of others, the 'negative capability' I have referred to, is still hindered by what we may see as her desire to transcend what (her) world has become. This precedes her confession on goodness to Vercueil. Because she does not want to die in this state of ugliness, as she writes to her daughter, she undertakes to save herself "[b]y doing what I do not want to do...I must love, first of all, the unlovable...Not bright little Bheki, but this one" (125). In her qualifier, "He is here for a reason" (125), she reveals her kinship with Everyman, and we hear resonances of the morality play, in which s/he is called to account through such visitations. She fears that in not wanting to love him, her love for her daughter is found wanting. When she writes that this is a "cruciform logic" (125) she has to accept, we might say, that love is a corollary of whatever it is that allows one to judge another kindly. She *is* "willing" to let herself "be nailed upon [that logic]" (125) - her letter stands as a testament to her love for a daughter who has abandoned her. The word abandoned is her own (127): "vomited up from the belly of the whale, misshapen, mysterious. Daughter" (128), through what comes to her anagrammatically as "Come back" (from Borodino) and "I call" (from Diconal) (128). Much earlier she had confessed to Vercueil "I think of her body, still, solid, alive, at peace, escaped. I ache to embrace her. 'I am so thankful,' I want to say, from a full heart. I also want to say, but never do: 'Save me!'" (67) - because, Elizabeth had believed, it is "unnatural" to plead for love: "like a parent trying to creep into bed with a child" (67). It is another of the "iron rules" she says (67), that love "should flow forward, not backward" (67). When Vercueil says: "Tell this to your daughter...She will come" (67) and Elizabeth cannot, he tells her, "Then don't tell her afterwards, when it is too late. She won't forgive you" (68). It is the only time he judges her, and it is perhaps an admission that conceals a confession of his own, and which is elided in her own response, that "[t]he rebuke was like a slap in the face" (68). Elizabeth defends herself against her love by saying she does not want her daughter with her, that she needs to long for her. This "nonsense" does not deflect Vercueil, "to his credit" she says, and as the angel of (her) home truths he says that she has to choose: "Tell her or don't tell her" (68). Elizabeth wants to evade what she cannot yet acknowledge. It is agonising for her -as she says, Vercueil "did nothing to help me" (68) - when what she would like to believe is her daughter's right to place principles before love. The evasion here, before the truth, recalls a queer sentiment she owns to

very early in her writing that contradicts the intense beauty in her language of love. It slips into her image of rendering herself in words "like sweets...As they say on the bottle: old-fashioned drops...packed with love, *the love we have no alternative but to feel toward those to whom we give ourselves to devour or discard*" (8, emphasis added). Faced now with Vercueil's faith in her daughter's love for her, Elizabeth cannot own to finding that love wanting. To the possible question, why tell her daughter at all? is the possible answer, the home truth: that principles put before love manifest a turning away from life. Just as the waterwings that her daughter tied onto her two sons, in the photograph taken on their canoe on a quiet lake, "will not guarantee them life" (179), principles not tempered by love cannot secure true signification, and come perilously close to the interestedness of the age of iron. Hence she cannot tell Vercueil that her daughter said "Do not call me back, Mother...because I will not come" (127); instead she tells Vercueil that her daughter has made a vow never to return to this *country* until the nationalist leaders "are hanging by their heels from the lamp-posts" (68). In answer to Vercueil's question, Elizabeth says, "I am the exile" (69). It is a truth that takes her by surprise: "He was learning to lead me on. I felt an urge to interrupt: 'It is such a pleasure!' I wanted to say. After long silence it is such a pleasure: tears come to the eyes" (69). Her exile from her daughter is one we have been prepared for narratologically: her opening words in her letter speak about the alley where she once played as a child as a "dead place" and "without use" now (3). And as an aubade, she tells her daughter as she begins writing:

> To live! You are my life; I love you as I love life itself. In the mornings I come out of the house and wet my finger and hold it up to the wind. When the chill is from the north-west, from your quarter, I stand a long time sniffing, concentrating my attention in the hope that across ten thousand miles of land and sea some breath will reach me of the milkiness you still carry with you behind your ears, in the fold of your neck.(5)

Elizabeth has enjoined herself to take her leave without bitterness. Telling her story: "To whom this writing then? The answer: to you, but not to you; to me; to you in me" (5), becomes her means of transcending death and loss through their representation in the symbolic order. What appears then as a painful invocation of the mother-child dyad becomes "a language for - and thus against - our sadness" as Lechte reads Kristeva (1990:38). In other words, Elizabeth's writing becomes her means to rebirth through "[l]etting go of myself, letting go of you, letting go of a house still alive with memories: a hard task, but I am learning" (119).

Part I of her writing manifests her resistance to 'letting go' and to "welcoming ... dissolution" (7). As she admits, she "revolts" against its symbol in the figure of the derelict Vercueil, whom she thinks is wasting his life (7). Part I precedes the return of

Florence and Elizabeth's own inscription into the violence of the Emergency. It is elegiac for the life that is possible, that "lost chord, the heart's chord" that her fingers search for among the pieces she plays on the piano, and in the visions she has in her pain, of "plump girls in flowered bathing costumes swimming in effortless backstroke" (24). This is what she longs to embrace (24). She must acknowledge that death is transcended symbolically through our issue, and that "we need to know who comes after us" (22) to fill the spaces we have inhabited and loved. She asks her daughter's forgiveness that she feels she is without succession (22), even though she has already said that only Florence qualifies "to have people" (10). When she later imagines Florence in her room "surrounded by her sleeping children ... every breath strong and clean", as she lies wakeful, with her "arms pressed to [her] chest to keep the pain from moving" (37), it recalls the "shock of pain that goes through me when, in an unguarded moment, a vision overtakes me of this house, empty, with sunlight pouring through the windows on to an empty bed" (23). The bitterness that this occasions points to a yearning for kinship that precedes and outlasts other considerations, she feels, because she can say of Florence: "Once I had everything, I thought. Now you have everything and I have nothing" (37).

It is a bitterness that persists against her addressing her daughter as "the beloved" (118). She waits on a vision of her daughter, always on the alert she says, should she "relent and, in whatever form, come visiting" (127). That she feels her separateness from her daughter is without (meta)physical assuaging, overcomes her desire toward unifying the disparate images she has of her and thus she says to her "there is not enough love, or at least not enough of the loving-yielding that brings love to life" in the letters that come from her (127). Without the promise of her daughter, the touch of whose hands would allow her to see her return to life each morning as the "miracle" she desires it to be, she sees it instead as "again I am back, from the belly of the whale disgorged. A miracle each time, unacknowledged, uncelebrated, unwelcome" (126). She had said to Vercueil earlier that in knowing she had seen her daughter to womanhood, and "safely to a new life", she had something that no-one could take away from her (66). Her distress now in the extremity of her pain, that comes from both within and without in Part III, discloses only a love likewise "disgorged", leaving her "stranded", "not properly born" (127). She fights against this rebirth into the dissolution of bonds, and visits upon her daughter the dissolution that undoes her: "What I bear, in your absence, is pain. I produce pain. You are my pain" (127). The need to let go, which she had known would be her hardest task, cannot yet be assimilated by her: her pain paradoxically asserts the life she can no longer be part of, as seen in her early vision of "False Bay under blue skies, pristine, deserted" (23). In her longing to be reclaimed by her "daughter life" (59) she can only accuse her of abandoning her: "I fling this accusation at you, into the north-west, into the teeth of the wind. I fling my pain at you" (127).

It is only after John's death, and her own escape in search of death, that Elizabeth is able to bear her pain herself, on her own. When she walks away from the house of violence, into the underside of the city-state, into the vale of the shadow of death, she begins to "feel the indifferent peace of an old animal that, sensing its time is near, creeps...into the hole in the ground where everything will contract to the slow thudding of a heart" (144). She is without Diconal, but she sleeps. She is 'disgorged' this time by the children of that "shadowland", childhood again distrained in the figure of a "shaven skull and bare feet and a hard look" (144). As they pry, or take from the dead what belongs to life, a gold tooth maybe, Elizabeth has a vision of wings passing, drawing her into the "great cycle" (144). The stick grainy with sand that has been pushed into her mouth and palate makes it hard to form words, but Elizabeth has forgiven the living now, wryly questioning what would have been her former response - an appeal to mercy. She thinks of the violence that dying witnesses to in the way ants will swarm into the "soft places" as the beetles wave their legs feebly (145). But she has nothing the children want, and she is found by Vercueil and his dog, to be brought back from Hades, to make her peace, we realise retrospectively, with herself. She wonders if this is how "the story ends", "being carried in strong arms across the sands, through the shallows ... into the darker depths?" (146). As he carries her to the vacant lot, she tells her daughter that she wondered when the time would come "when the jacket fell away and great wings sprouted from his shoulders?" (146). When she wakes next to him on their flattened cardboard box, with the warmth of his dog between them, she can say "I am not gone", certain in the knowledge that she has not "quite given up yet" (152). In her present understanding of kinship (she later says more directly, "One must love what is to hand, as a dog loves" (174)) she can ask her daughter to accept that it is Vercueil she knows best at "this hour" (147). Furthermore she can accept her own need to examine the discourses that have written her, in the light of her own restless desire to love and to write still: "Sightless, ignorant, I follow where the truth takes me" (148).

Her movement into the allegorical last section, Part IV, in which the last stages of her cancer deliver her entirely into Vercueil's care, is precipitated by her certainty that he is her "angel", "come to show [her] the way" (153). The night that she is away from her house, in the urban shadowland and then in Vercueil's Arcady where her confession is made, renders their hearts "naked", "beating in chests of glass". The shame that had consumed her life, and which she had concealed, so seeing 'through a glass darkly' is now understood as "the torrents of grief" from which the soul emerges, "neophyte, wet, blind, ignorant" (170), for its inception into the order of *caritas*, a state of grace in which she will learn to give and accept love and forgiveness.

After the night of her death and rebirth, Elizabeth walks back to the house with Vercueil along Vrede Street, street of peace, and accepts the paradox of being

painfully in the midst of life: in this dawn of well-being which she knows is a warning of pain to come, she can say to him "I would love to buy you a new hat" (152). It is at this time that she tells him - not innocently she points out to him - her dream in which he was teaching her to swim, and drawing her into the depths, and how she wanted to turn back (153). She is, he must know, placing herself entirely in his care, trusting him as her angel of death. She tells him she had wondered if he were an angel, also accepting her reponsibility for the reality that we create and thus can recreate/revise: "But that is only half the story, isn't it? We half perceive but we also half create" (153). This understanding, following her confession, allows her to re-enter her history, this time acknowledging dissolution as part of her revisionary process. She is afraid she does not have time, and Vercueil senses her urgency to make reparation:

> 'Maybe you've also got time,' he whispered, and gave me his toothed leer.
> For an instant it was as if the heavens opened and light blazed down. Hungry for good news after a lifetime of bad news, unable to help myself, I smiled back. 'Really?' I said. He nodded. Like two fools we grinned at each other. (166)

In titling her review of *Age of Iron* "Thanatophany for South Africa: Death With/Out Transfiguration" Benita Parry accommodates the narrative's dominant discursive spaces: one is the vision of the degraded present without prefiguration of the better, hence transfiguration - Elizabeth's last dream of Florence with Hope and Beauty at her side: "Forever the goddess is passing, forever, caught in a posture of surprise and regret" (164), significantly gives way to the dust of Borodino, field of slaughter (170). The other discursive space is the journey toward personal redemption for which Elizabeth Curren is prepared to suffer. The narrative ends with the *embrace* that initiates her release into death, premised by the certainty of love, which she says, has drawn all warmth from her (181). If by this we may infer a rebirth in the form of her words, her testament, through Vercueil and her daughter, then the terrible child which occasioned her writing has written her into the order of the heroic, a death with transfiguration.

On the subject of grace, Coetzee has written that it is "a condition in which the truth can be told clearly, without blindness" (1992:392). Perhaps it is because Vercueil escapes a fixing in history and discourse, is ignorant and innocent of a 'middle voice' so to speak, that he facilitates Elizabeth Curren's revision and re-vision of the discourses that have written her, and as her other introjects her into the maternal order, and into the mode of storytelling. A figure of history might have constrained her writing through a Socratic praxis, and rendered her narrative tautological. Instead:

> I have fallen and he has caught me. It is not he who fell under my care when he arrived, I now understand, nor I who fell under his: we fell under each other, and have tumbled and risen since then in the flights and swoops of that mutual election (179).

Thus it is that in reciprocity Elizabeth Curren finds grace.

CONCLUSION

Confessional narrative as a mode is concerned with beginnings, and with re-construction. Its praxis is that of the disrupted subject who through acknowledging complicity in the discourses that have written her/him, writes the self into reconciliation with the other. For this reason, confessional writing is metonymic of what Hassan sees as "a vast revisionary will in the Western world, unsettling/resettling codes [and] canons" (in: Hutcheon 1989:18).

Confessional writing, as it emerges from an ending in this country - the dying of repressive nationalisms - is precursive of social renewal through, in Ndebele's words, the "perfection of the individual" (1986:150). This change in which the subject becomes answerable for collective ideologies, is a process of introjection, a movement away from the dialectic of interestedness in which principles are put before love. It is a movement from the spectacular and heroic to the ordinary, as Ndebele envisions it; from the public to the private; from filiation to affiliation; from Cartesian autonomy and transcendence to a relational sense of connection to others. The new order is founded on an acceptance of differences, rather than on the monistic imperative within Cartesian binarisms. 'Otherness' rather than 'othered' becomes the new historical praxis.

When Elizabeth Curren writes "[t]his was never meant to be the story of a body, but of the soul it houses. I will not show to you what you will not be able to bear: a woman in a burning house running from window to window, calling through the bars for help" (1990:170), she is taking leave of the spectacle of conflagration - our particular history - and narrating the self. As a voice anticipating the new order, she accepts that it is only through representation that we transcend fear and loss, and are able to love others.

If there is to be a national literature, perhaps it lies in the 'rediscovery of the ordinary' as Ndebele has proposed. Confessional writing, premised as it is on a desire for a reconstituted self and world in which a doctrine of mercy is coterminous with a doctrine of accountable action, has surely prepared for the voice of the ordinary.

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