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The dialogue between Christianity and postmodernism in selected postmodern novels.

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Contents

Abstract

This paper seeks to explore the dialogue between postmodern thought and Christian theology. The dialogue will be grounded in four postmodern novels: Toni Morrison's *Beloved,* Ian McEwan's *Atonement,* Jill Paton Walsh's *Knowledge of Angels,* and Jeanette Winterson's *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit.*

In many Church circles, it has often been said that postmodernism, as it manifests itself in popular culture, is a threat to the Christian faith. However, I will be arguing that the opposite is the case, and that postmodernism has allowed for new ways of thinking about the self that has great resonance with certain theological conceptions of the self. It will be argued that the postmodern subject is one that seeks to make sense of 'the other' without risking the exploitation of the other, and that this lies very close to the theological concept of relationship, based on the idea of covenant. The self as responsible to an other and as a participant in community will be explored, from both the postmodern and theological perspectives.

Before exploring issues of the self, this thesis will contextualize the dialogue by exploring postmodern conceptions of space and time. It will examine how ideas around space and time have been imagined throughout human history, thereby contextualizing the emergence of postmodern thinking. It will then show how this emergence of a postmodern space and time in fact creates new possibilities for

the Christian faith to reexpress itself in ways that are more relevant to the 21st century.

The concluding chapter of this thesis brings to light the longing within our postmodern reality for a place we can call home, a place where we can belong, and find healing. Such a place, such a homecoming, is offered to us in the spaces opened up to us by the dialogue between the Christian faith and postmodernity, and is found within a community of people who are learning that, as, postmodern philosopher Emmanuel Levinas states, "there is something more important than my life, and that is the life of the other" (in Beavers, 1996, 16).

This whole thesis, unless specifically indicated to the contrary in the text, is my own, original work.

Chapter 1

Introduction

"Where was God now, with heaven full of astronauts, and the Lord overthrown? I miss God. I miss the company of someone utterly loyal. I still don't see God as my betrayer. The servants of God, yes, but servants by their very nature betray. I miss God who was my friend" (*Oranges*, 164). In the character of Jeanette in Jeanette Winterson's novel *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit*, we experience a deep yearning, a longing for something she once had but now is lost to her, or perhaps it is a longing for something more, something new. This sentiment is echoed repeatedly in the popular culture of today. I hear Avril Lavigne singing, "Isn't anyone trying to find me/Won't somebody come take me home/It's a damn cold night/Trying to figure out this life/Won't you take me by the hand, take me somewhere new".

The thesis that follows is about longing for home. It is an analysis of four novels that have two things in common: they embody elements of what is known as 'postmodern thought' and they involve characters who are longing, much as Avril Lavigne is, to be taken home, or else, somewhere new, to a place beyond where they find themselves.

Postmodern thought, which has its outworking in popular postmodern culture, is a very elusive term. To define it or contain it would be impossible. Instead, I

intend to highlight elements of postmodern thought as they relate directly to this longing, and as they are manifested in the chosen texts. I would also like to keep as a consideration the way postmodern thought has manifested and expressed itself in popular culture, and the implications of this for the person on the street. This perspective on the topic will also aid in understanding postmodern thought as it expresses itself in the texts. Out of this concern with postmodern thought, the philosophies of Emmanuel Levinas and Jacques Derrida seem to me the most relevant, as will be explained later, and so these will be the primary postmodern philosophers I will be referring to.

I separate postmodern thought and postmodern popular culture as they are distinctly different perspectives or angles on a phenomenon that has developed out of and after modernism. Postmodern thought refers to the critical theory and philosophy that has become particularly prominent in the last fifty years, and is often coupled with French poststructuralism and postcolonial thinking. Postmodern popular culture is perhaps best described as the cultural manifestations we see around us everyday, of a society that has moved into a technological, global, cyber-crazed, hip-hop, media-orientated sphere, as opposed to a culture grounded on traditional values and the precepts of the enlightenment, science and modernism.

The areas of postmodern thought that will be highlighted are as follows: conceptions of time, space and the postmodern subject. Each of these areas is

directly dealt with in the novels, brings to the fore central aspects of postmodern thought, and leads us into a consideration of longing for home. The chapter on time argues for a paradigm beyond seeing time as linear as was developed during the Enlightenment, or dissolving it entirely, as postmodernism is argued to be doing. Rather, it will argue towards a theory of time that emphasizes relationship and people over facts and events. It will further argue that the past is important in the present with responsibilities for the future because of people and relationships. Following on from this, the chapter on space considers the homogenous, sterile space materialists tend to operate in and compares it to the postmodern attempt to permeate the boundaries of the spaces we find ourselves in. As with the chapter on time, the paradigm I will be working towards is one that favours people space or relational space over and above other understandings of space. In the chapter on identity, I will again compare the idea of the autonomous, independent agent with that of the postmodern constructed, fragmented, multiple subject. And will again argue for an identity that is grounded in relationship, grounded in the space between people. As is thus clear from this paragraph, this entire thesis is arguing for a paradigm rooted in human relationship. And this human relationship is symbolic of a place of belonging, a place of acceptance, a place of love, a place of healing and so on. All these things that we long for I place in the general category of 'home' – the ideal that captures that place in space and time where we can just be.

The first sentence of this thesis, where I quote from Jeanette Winterson's *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit,* immediately points to another articulation of this idea of 'longing for home'. Winterson describes her central character, Jeanette, as longing for God. All the novels under study examine, directly or indirectly, Christian themes. Thus this thesis is about Christianity and postmodern thought. It is about a religious system that has arguably lost its relevance but may be able to re-express itself in a postmodern context. Each of the novels under study points towards this potential reemergence of Christian or Biblical themes within a new paradigm. The paradigm we are coming from, loosely described as modernity, seems to emphasize such things as rational scientific enquiry, a linear understanding of time, homogenous space and a rather prescribed subject. The novels in question defy such prescription. They highlight the danger of seeing only one perspective, listening to only one voice. This thesis would like to consider postmodern thought as an opportunity for seeing alternative perspectives, for listening to multiple voices; and then to consider how an ancient religious system such as Christianity may reemerge in a new and relevant way, in a way that can be expressed relevantly in our current popular culture. This is important for me on a very personal level. It is also important for the faith to be able to see postmodern thought not as a threat, as has so often happened, but rather as an opportunity. And it is terribly important for the postmodern paradigm, both in critical thought and popular culture, to be challenged by and reminded of its cultural roots, of its 'home' and of the necessity to listen even to the voice of Christianity.

Why is it important to listen to the Christian voice in a context that has often been described as having moved quite happily beyond any prescribed religious system? It is difficult to answer this question, and I may well fail to throughout this thesis. But here is an attempt. There is something about that longing that I have alluded to, that has a spiritual element. Postmodern thought and culture have revived an interest in spirituality. Author of the scientific novel, *The Pearly Gates of Cyberspace*, Margaret Wertheim, suggests that we have replaced a 'celestial' longing with an obsession with cyber surfing (1999). It seems that somehow the human condition, as can be seen in our art, poetry and literature, is founded on some sort of longing, yearning for something: for home? for somewhere new? The closest I can come to understanding this longing, as it is expressed in the four novels, is to draw on my own knowledge of spiritual insights as expressed in the Christian faith. Each novel draws on Christianity, and expresses this intense yearning, and embraces elements of postmodern thought that interact directly with both Christianity and this somewhat elusive longing.

In this thesis I am grappling with that seeking for 'home' and 'for somewhere new'. The expression of the, perhaps, Christian longing within a postmodern context can well be captured within two primary Biblical and postmodern concepts. The first is the idea of redemption. In each of the novels, the characters are somehow seeking to be redeemed. There is a yearning towards being accepted, or belonging within a community. The second is the idea of

'otherness'. The term 'the other' is a popular one both in postmodern and theological circles. What does it mean to accept another person on their own terms? How is it that we can have a self without impinging on the selfhood of someone else? It is clear that these two concepts, otherness and redemption, are very much interrelated, and that they both point to that longing as described before. Thus, traveling through the novels, along the paths of space, time and identity, I hope to begin unfolding the possibilities of Christianity and postmodern thought in dialogue with one another, with specific reference to otherness and redemption, and ultimately, home-coming. Both Levinas and Derrida have much to say on the topic of 'the other' and on the idea of home.

The four novels under question are: Jill Paton Walsh's *Knowledge of Angels*, Jeanette Winterson's *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit*, Toni Morrison's *Beloved* and Ian McEwan's *Atonement*. They can all be described as being postmodern novels. What follows is a brief orientation to these four novels, focusing particularly on what they have to say about aspects of postmodernism and Christianity. Our process of orientation will see us on a journey that begins with *Knowledge of Angels*, which will bring to our attention the debate between Christianity and a rational, humanistic and scientifically-orientated paradigm. Next, we will travel to 'postmodern' times and be introduced to *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit*, where the central character, Jeanette, will lead us through circular narratives and crumbling boundaries. We will journey deeper into postmodern waters as we delve into *Beloved* where we will come face-to-face with

fragmented identities. Our journey will come to a close in our analysis of *Atonement*, where multiple realities are at play.

1.1. *Knowledge of Angels*

"This story is set on an Island somewhat like Mallorca, but not Mallorca, at a time somewhat like 1450, but not 1450. A fiction is always, however obliquely, about the time and place in which it was written." So begins Jill Paton Walsh's *Knowledge of Angels*. The story unfolds with a group of village men travelling up into the mountains to gather snow. They come across a horrific creature, a snarling, angry animal who, by an appalling surprise, turns out to be a human being, a young girl. The natural inclination of the men is to kill the creature, but a young villager named Jaime prevents such an act from occurring. "I should have killed it..." says one villager, eyeing the grotesque creature as it rips raw meat off the bones of one of their lambs. "But that would be murder!" cries Jaime in response. The first moral battle of the book has begun.

Amara, the wolf-child, is harboured at a convent, where the nuns look after her and attempt to train her towards human behaviour. Simultaneously, another story unfolds. A young man, a prince, falls off his boat and finds himself on the village island. This island is sheltered and entirely self-absorbed. It knows nothing of the outside world, and is run according to a fundamentalist Christian authority. Palinor wants to find a way back to his home island, but finds this is a difficult

task on an island wary of outsiders. When it is discovered that Palinor is in fact an atheist, his departure from the island, where atheists are burnt at the stake, becomes even less likely.

This novel, which stages the Christian-materialist debate, develops into a complicated struggle between differing value systems and perspectives. The island's most intellectual inhabitants, the leaders of the Church, find themselves stupified in the face of Palinor's rational arguments. Never before having thought outside of the realms of Christian philosophy, they are stumped when Palinor can see beyond the age-old 'every effect must have a cause' argument. Tidal waves of confusion occur in the lives of those with whom Palinor, this alien, this stranger, this 'other', comes into contact. The great thinkers of the island begin to lose their faith, servant-lovers discover sexual pleasures before believed to be an evil sin, and villagers far and wide are confronted with a perspective that is so different from their own they have no way of dealing with it.

To save Palinor from death, a humble monk, with the highest authority on the island, decides to run an experiment. The argument goes that knowledge of God is inherent in all people, and therefore no one can deny God. But Severo wants to prove that knowledge of God is not necessarily inherent, thereby exonerating Palinor. Who better to work this experiment on than the wolf-child, who has had no teaching, no influences of any kind to direct her towards God? The nuns are instructed not to mention God, and time will tell, Severo believes, whether Palinor

is or is not guilty of denying a God whose truths have never been made known to him as the ultimate truth to be accepted. "How do you judge someone," asks Severo, "who has met the truth amidst a plethora of contending claims and a clamour of voices each declaring the truth of their own message?" (59).

This novel depicts starkly and clearly, the struggle between fundamental Christianity and a materialist paradigm. It seems to celebrate rational thought and the overriding truth of scientific sense. Morals and values are not based on some obscure traditions wielded by far away authorities, but through the sensible decisions made by individuals about their own behaviours. Asks one of the learned monks, "Surely an atheist, moved neither by the hope of heaven nor the fear of hell, would feel free to defy laws and to run amok?" And Palinor replies, "A rational man may have sufficient reasons in this world to concede the necessity for laws and the benefits of obeying them. I think for most people, the desire to stand well in the eyes of the neighbours is reason enough" (80). The novel seems to leave no room for a Christian alternative. Christianity is viewed in its (perhaps correctly identified) destructive limitations.

And yet, at the end of the novel, moments before Palinor is to be burnt at the stake, he lies awake thinking. He ponders over the deep and powerful love men of God have had for him. Men who have lost their faith because of him. And in that moment, Palinor longs to believe, longs to believe that suffering has moral meaning. He attempts at this moment even to pray. This is a profound moment in

the book where modernity comes face-to-face in an extremely honest way with Christianity. The dialogue here is very real. It brings to mind the words of Francis Schaeffer, "I have never met a man who thought orthodox Christianity ugly once he understood the titanic answers it gives. What is ugly is Christianity without compassion" (1970, 50). This truth is made starkly known in *Knowledge of Angels*.

1.2. *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit*

We travel through time and geography to another outsider, another 'other', grappling to express herself in another self-absorbed fundamentalist Christian community. "Like most people, I lived for a long time with my mother and father. My father liked to watch wrestling, my mother liked to wrestle" (3). So begins Winterson's *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit*. Characteristic of this novel is the dry sense of humour disguising mountains of insight in simple syntax and seemingly childlike ways of thinking. *Oranges* takes us on a journey through the life of a young girl by the name of Jeanette, as she wanders through life in this fundamentalist Christian community and through the pages of the book, each chapter titled with the name of books of the Bible.

In 'Genesis' we are told of Jeanette's family and beginnings. 'Exodus', 'Leviticus' and 'Numbers' give us insight into Jeanette's involvement in her very closed community, which results in her being entirely alienated from anything 'worldly'.

"You do seem rather pre-occupied, shall we say, with God," say Jeanette's teachers to her at school, with grave concern (40). This period of Jeanette's life is characterised by a complete belief and involvement in the fundamentalist group she finds herself in, but which is slowly coming apart at the seams. There are some things that just do not run true, for Jeanette.

In 'Deuteronomy', Winterson begins to question the truth of things. She brings to light the fact that truth may be constructed. "Everyone who tells a story tells it differently, just to remind us that everybody sees it differently. Some people say there are true things to be found, some people say all kinds of things can be proved. I don't believe them. The only thing for certain is how complicated it all is. Like a string full of knots. It's all there but it's hard to find the beginning and impossible to fathom the end" (91). This differs completely from Palinor's issues with Christianity. He believed strongly that rational thought and scientific explanation would lead him to a sensible truth. Jeanette has embraced the postmodernist view of the world around her, seeing the complexity of multiple perspectives and the constructedness of reality.

In 'Joshua' the battle begins between Jeanette trying to express her identity and her community restraining her in their predisposed views of who she should be. At no point does Jeanette want to leave this community. Her desire is only to be accepted within the community as she is. Her great sin, to have fallen in love with another woman, is one made in absolute innocence. But this innocent mistake, of

loving her closest friend too much, rocks the little community to the point of creating enormous division and unhappiness. Jeanette is 'judged' because of her 'sin', of course, in 'Judges', where the pastor of the community spends long sessions with Jeanette in an attempt to lead her to a confession and an admission to change her ways. But instead Jeannette decides to leave home rather than be something she is not. Here comes to light a major limitation postmodernity sees in Christianity: the moment a particular viewpoint is prescribed, it excludes and alienates all those who think or feel differently.

Nevertheless, after leaving the community, the home strings keep pulling, and in 'Ruth', Jeanette returns to visit her mother and revisit all the issues of the past. The life her mother had created in which Jeanette had grown up has fallen apart completely. Jeanette discovers that, "[t]he Society had been disbanded, that there had been corruption at Morecombe guest house, and that the Rev Bone was a broken man. It seems most of the money put aside for the ...missions had gone to pay for the secretary's gambling debts; the profits from my mother's ...sales of religious accoutrements had gone to pay for his wife's maintenance. His estranged wife. The woman he lived with was his girlfriend" (159). All of this hardly seems to disturb Jeanette's mother, who finds new things to focus her energies on with as much passion and conviction.

The interesting thing is that it's not just the strings of home that are pulling her back. At the end of the novel, through all the pain and trauma that Jeanette

undergoes at the hands of the Christian community, after all she has discovered about the world out there and her own identity, after she has come face-to-face with the deceptiveness and lies that lay behind the thin veneer of a perverted religion, Jeanette nevertheless says those words mentioned at the start of this chapter, "I miss God. I miss the company of somebody totally loyal" (165).

1.3. *Beloved*

"I will call them my people, who are not my people; and her beloved, which was not beloved" (Romans 9:25). These are the words with which Morrison begins her novel *Beloved*. The reference in Romans is to an earlier phrase in the Old Testament where God tells Israel, through the prophet Hosea, "I will sow a crop of Israelites and raise them for myself! I will pity those who are not pitied and I will say to those who are not my people, 'Now you are my people', and they will reply, 'you are our God!'" (Hosea 2:23). It is a moment of ownership. It is a moment in which God redeems his people and welcomes them back into his arms. But further, when it is referred to in the New Testament (Romans 9:25) it is *in the context of welcoming the Gentiles, the traditional 'other' into the fold of* God's 'beloved' (Ochoa, 1999). This issue of ownership, of identity, of belonging and not belonging, and being loved and not being loved is fundamental to *Beloved*.

Unlike *Oranges* and *Knowledge of Angels*, *Beloved* does not deal directly with the dialogue between Christianity and other paradigms of thinking. Nevertheless, throughout the novel, one gets a deep sense of intentional parallels between the novel and aspects of the Christian tradition. Symbolism, Biblical references and the like are rife throughout, as the horrific story unfolds.

The novel deals with slavery in the United States, in the late 1800's, revealing stories of atrocities beyond human comprehension. The story opens in 124, a house inhabited by broken people, and frightening ghosts. Morrison describes it as being "full of a baby's venom" (3). And that baby is the one murdered by her own mother to protect her from a life of slavery. Sethe is born into slavery and finds herself sold to a farm ironically called Sweet Home. On this farm are five young men who are treated by their owner as men, and not as slaves. Although even this is a deceptive treatment, as will later be discussed in greater depth, as these men are only 'men' as long as their owner has them under his control. But when the 'school teacher' comes to take control of the farm, the stark reality of their slave existence hits home.

Within a few months, Paul D is collared like a beast and kept in a cage. Sixo is burnt alive. Another is left hanging from a tree. And Sethe has had her milk stolen from her by the school teacher's nephew. Their dignity is shattered, their identities torn from them. Through a complicated turn of events, Sethe murders

her daughter in an attempt to save her child from slavery. But the ghost of the baby haunts her home in a frightening way.

The book develops as a justification on Sethe's behalf to her daughter. She wants more than anything to be redeemed of her actions, to explain them for the act of love that they were. When her daughter reappears in her life as a living child, a fierce and disturbingly manipulative relationship develops between them. Fragmented identities develop as characters in the story lose sight of owning their own identities. In haunting resonance to passages from the Song of Solomon, we read, "I am beloved and she is mine...I am not separate from her...there is no place where I stop...her face is my own" (210).

Fragmented identities, lack of ownership over self, and merging identities in fierce and possessive love may characterise the novel. But nearing the end of the story, Sethe says, either of her baby or of Beloved (the distinction is unclear) "She was my best thing" and Paul D replies with emphasis, "You your best thing, Sethe. You are" (273). He is returning to her the hope of selfhood, identity, healing, wholeness.

1.4. *Atonement*

Atonement begins with a play. And it is almost impossible to unravel where the playing stops and real life begins. Briony designs the plays. She writes the

scripts, she manipulates the characters, and she draws the curtain to reveal the action on stage. Her plays become so complicated as to influence her entire existence. She rewrites reality and creates destruction. And she continues to rewrite reality again and again to try and atone for the chaos she has created. But the consequences of her imagination are irredeemable.

Briony is the youngest daughter within a wealthy English family that lives in the country. Her older brother is at the University, her sister is deciding what to do with her life, her mother and father move on the periphery of the novel, and the drama centres itself around a gardener with an education. This gardener, Robbie, finds himself in a complicated love relationship with Briony's sister, Cecilia. Through a bizarre twist of events, largely created through Briony's unbounded imagination, Robbie is accused of raping a visiting cousin of the family, and is taken to prison. World War II follows shortly afterwards, and here ambiguity arises as to what really happened and what was created by Briony as an atonement for Robbie and Cecilia's pain.

The crux of the story lies in a revelation Briony has at the age of eleven. "Was everyone else really as alive as she was? Was being Cecilia just as vivid an affair as being Briony? Did her sister also have a real self concealed behind a breaking wave, and did she spend time thinking about it? If the answer was yes, then the world, the social world, was unbearably complicated, with two billion voices, and everyone's thoughts striving in equal importance and everyone's

claim on life equally intense, and everyone's thinking they were unique, when no one was" (36). Even though Briony knew this to be true, it didn't 'feel' to her like it was true (36). It is this conflict between one's own mind and perspective, and the reality as seen, or as constructed, in the mind of every other individual, uniquely, that overwhelms Briony. She cannot understand where the construction of reality and reality itself begins or ends. And where her construction of reality may conflict with or influence other people's realities. It is when her constructions of reality result in the destruction of other's lives, that she begins to understand that there need to be boundaries.

Her rewriting of the story is that Cecilia becomes a nurse and Robbie is at war (although this is not merely Briony's construction but actually as McEwan writes it). She develops an in-depth account of all the trauma and hardship Robbie endures at war, and the emotional correspondence between himself and Cecilia. She writes of their eventual reunion where all ends well. The truth is, both are killed under unromantic circumstances before ever seeing each other again. The truth is (at least, it is hinted at) that a visiting friend raped the cousin, and that they are now married. Her rewrite of the truth is so close to the truth, often overlapping with the truth, that it is difficult at the end of the novel to unravel construction from reality. Or even to be certain if there is a reality beyond construction. Which is, of course, a fundamental characteristic of postmodern thought. And it is not only Briony's constructions that become ambiguous. One is

stretched even further to question the whole principle of fiction, and the power of the writer to create and construct realities which the reader takes as being 'real'.

At the age of seventy-seven, Briony can see no purpose in telling the story as it really was. "What sense or hope or satisfaction could a reader draw from such an account [the truth]?" asks Briony (371). "When [we are all dead] we will only exist as my inventions... No one will care what events and which individuals were misrepresented to make a novel. I know there's always a certain kind of reader who will be compelled to ask, But what really happened? The answer is simple: the lovers survive and flourish. As long as there is a single copy, a solitary typescript of my final draft, then my spontaneous, fortuitous sister and her medical prince survive to love" (371). She has reduced the two billion equally important, equally intense voices to only one, her own.

"The problem these fifty-nine years," writes Briony, "has been this: How can a novelist achieve atonement when, with her absolute power of deciding outcomes, she is also God? There is no one, no entity or higher form that she can appeal to, or be reconciled with, or that can forgive her. There is nothing outside her. In her imagination she has set the limits and the terms. No atonement for God, or novelists, even if they are atheists" (371). That is the horror of the postmodern condition.

1.5. Postmodern narrative strategies

Although I have avoided defining postmodern thought, I will attempt to elaborate on what makes the four chosen novels postmodern. Each novel employs certain narrative strategies that place them, for varying reasons, within the category of 'postmodern fiction'. But before I do that, first some words on my own 'narrative strategy' in this thesis.

I have tended to move away from the strict academic style. This is not because I am unable to understand or apply the requirements of academic discourse. Rather, I have consciously chosen to adopt a style that blurs the boundaries between what is academic and what is non-academic. Postmodern philosopher, Jacques Derrida, suggests that what postmodernism is doing is blurring the boundaries, questioning the boundaries, taking us beyond the boundaries (in Royle, 2003). And the purpose behind such 'playing' with boundaries is to question their relevance, their importance, even their significance in our reading of the world around us. We are moving into an era where, through the internet, everyone has access to any information at any time. What is important is not so much information, but being able to access the information quickly and accurately. We are moving into an era where the very precepts of the academy are being questioned, and the academy, particularly in South Africa, can no longer merely assume its position and power in society. Without elaborating this in too much detail, it does lead to my own belief that any academic project only

has relevance in so far as it has relevance to the person on the street. And so, rather conservatively, as it is my first project, I am attempting to move away from strict academic style and experimenting with something perhaps just a little bit closer to other forms of writing – fiction, journalism, storytelling, letter writing, spoken dialogue. Those were some words on my own narrative strategy; now back to the novels!

A narrative strategy that was immediately apparent to me in each of the four novels was their use of time and space. Each of the novels moves from the present to the past and the future very fluidly. They move from that which is real to that which is imagined or remembered. They move to such an extent that the reader begins to question what is 'real' and what is imagined. Postmodern fiction grapples with just such issues as what is fiction and what is representation.

Postmodern fiction writer and critic, Umberto Eco, argues that postmodern fiction is concerned with time, and its representation, and with irony (in Brooker, 1992, 225). Postmodernism recognizes the past, since the past 'cannot really be destroyed', says Eco, 'because its destruction leads to silence'. Instead, the past is 'revisited: but with irony, not innocence' (1992, 227). All four novels deal ironically with time. Each raises issues around what is real and what is not real, what is fictional and what is historical. Hutcheon describes postmodern fiction as self-consciously problematizing the making of fiction and history (in Brooker, 1992, 230).

Knowledge of Angels has a prescript that immediately brings the ironic play with space and time to the fore. It reads:

> Suppose you are contemplating an island. You are looking at it from a great height. At this height your viewpoint is more like that of an angel. But after all, the position of a reader in a book is very like the position held by angels in the world, when angels still had any credibility. Yours is, like theirs, a hovering, gravely attentive presence, observing everything, from whom nothing is concealed, for angels are very bright mirrors. The time of your contemplation is as mysterious as its place – it is the time of angels, to whom everything is always present... You see now a party of young men, laboriously ascending a mountain path. They will climb as often as you or anyone opens this book and reads; but the climb is to them irrevocable; each footfall as they make it vanishes into the past (10).

Here, Paton Walsh brings us to a self-conscious awareness of the constructed nature of writing, of recounting a story; of reading and the role in construction that the reader plays. She brings to our attention questions of representation. Hutcheon argues that postmodern thought does not dissolve representation, but problematises it, making us aware of the 'ideological' nature of representation (in Brooker, 1992, 235). She describes ideology to be the way a culture represents itself to itself, and that narratives often make it seem as if this representation is natural or common-sensical rather than constructed. Postmodern narrative strategies make us aware of the constructed nature of representation.

In *Atonement*, Ian McEwan makes us painfully aware of this through the seemingly 'seamless' yet later glaringly constructed representation of World War II. As one reads the novel, it seems as if Robbie and Cecilia's experiences during the war are 'real'. The reader is taken through the moving and almost tangible – so real it seems – journey of Robbie as a soldier narrowly escaping death. The reader can almost smell the stench of sickness and death in the hospital where Cecilia works. And yet near the end of the novel it becomes apparent that all this is merely the construction of Briony's mind, and Robbie and Cecilia are 'really' dead. It is this ironic play with what is real and what is fictional, what is historic 'fact' and what is imagined that typifies postmodern narrative strategy. When starting this thesis, this strategy frustrated me tremendously. Initially, I read into McEwan's playing with narration an insult to the enormity of the events he was describing. I read it as a conscious undermining of some of the most horrific events in history. And this point of view may still, unintentionally, filter through in some of my arguments. Later, I came to realize that this irony was in fact tremendously serious in its intentions. As will be expounded upon at a later stage, the importance of problematizing time, space and identity, of playing with narrative conventions, of questioning representation is paramount to the very nature of dialogue. Postmodern philosopher Jacques Derrida argues that outside of play we have stagnation and death. Within the discomfort of irony there is room for rethinking the old paradigms to allow for something new.

The problematizing of so-called 'master narratives' through playing with narrative strategies in fiction has a political angle to it. Part of the purpose of undermining master narratives is to equalize power. Whereas before power lay in the hands of those who knew the 'rules of the game', the rules are now changed and the very idea of having rules is undermined, thus destabilizing power. This, anyway, is the argument of many postmodern proponents. Whether it is really the case, that power has the potential to be shared through the processes of deconstruction, amongst other things, is one of the things that will be argued in this thesis. Hutcheon argues that what postmodernism does is not question premises of truth (as Ian Hunter suggested earlier) but rather ask the question, 'whose truth?' (in Brooker, 1992, 230). It's not so much a matter of undermining representation as asking 'whose representation?'

In Winterson's novel, *Oranges*, we see a fascinating switching between Jeanette in 'real-time' as it were, and Winnet, who operates in 'fantasy-time'. Both characters lives run closely in parallel and both have names which play on the name of the author. Again, as with postmodern narrative strategies generally, Winterson brings to light questions of representation. Is the novel autobiographical or completely fictional? Is Jeanette 'real' or is Winnet 'real'? Does each of their experiences count as much as the others' even though one operates in 'reality' and the other in 'fairytale' land? It is these kinds of unanswerable questions that Winterson plays with, and that force the reader to acknowledge the complex nature of representation and the danger of unself-

conscious representation, with its layers of hidden ideological agendas (Hutcheon, in Brooker, 1992, 130).

Morrison can be seen to be doing similar things with *Beloved*, both with her play with memory and re-memorizing, and with her introduction of the 'ghost character', Beloved. 'Is Beloved real, or is she a ghost?' asks the reader. And yet, are any of the characters 'real' in any 'real' sense of the word? As the memories of Sethe and Paul D unfold we see how their constructions of what 'really happened' differ, and have influenced decisions they have made later on. McEwan asks in his novel: does 'what really happened' really matter? And it is these kinds of questions all the novelists seem to be asking. Morrison argues in an interview (in Davis, 2002) that remembering and reconstructing African-American history is of vital importance. Yet her novels – and the postmodern narrative strategies she uses – remind the reader that these memories, these re-memberings, are always only constructions, representations.

The last point about postmodern narrative strategies is their unfinished nature. Postmodernism asks questions; it does not give final answers. In the same set of essays as those by Hutcheon and Eco, novelist Carlos Fuentes says that it is only when things are unfinished that they can continue to be. He quotes Luis Buñuel as saying, "I would give my life for a man who is looking for the truth. But I would gladly kill a man who says he has found the truth" (in Brooker, 1992, 244). This echoes what critical theorist, Anthony Giddens, will be seen to be

arguing a bit later, that insisting on one viewpoint is such a destructive and dangerous thing. It is within the continual dialogue, the unfinished dialogue, between multiple perspectives, that we can move forward together. Fuentes writes: "The novel is the privileged arena where languages in conflict can meet, bringing together, in tension and dialogue, not only opposing characters, but also different historical ages, social levels, civilizations and other, dawning realities of human life. In the novel, realities that are normally separated can meet, establishing a dialogic encounter, a meeting with the other" (in Brooker, 1992, 250).

1.6. The end of the journey

In an on-line discussion on postmodernism and Christianity, popular theologian, Ian Hunter, describes the binary opposition commonly believed to exist between Christianity and postmodernism.

> We are orphans without a father, living in a country without a history, in a world without purpose, on a globe spinning through a trackless universe, without Creator and without end. Christians said that without God there could be no truth; the postmodernist replies: "There is no truth." Christians said that without the first cause, there could be neither causation nor purpose to life; the postmodernist says: "Life has no purpose." Christians said that without natural law there can be no right and wrong, only chaos; the postmodernist replies: "There is only chaos." Christians said that without the Ten Commandments, law has no moral basis; the

> postmodernist says: "There is no law, only power." The Christian said that without God incarnate, Jesus Christ, there is no hope of salvation; the postmodernist replies: "There is no salvation." This is the wasteland of postmodernism (Hunter, 2003).

It is this particular type of reaction towards postmodernism that I will be arguing against. In fact, from a careful study of the novels, it seems that it is this kind of prescriptive, simplistic interpretation of the complex shades of grey that the novels themselves are arguing against. It is so easy to put Christianity in a box, to put postmodern thought in a box. And yet what this thesis seeks to do is to break away from such 'single-point perspectives' and, through a careful, nuanced dialogue, begin to unravel the complicated interwovenness of the various paradigms under question. In a series of lectures where he critically analyses postmodernism and high modernism, Giddens says, "If you insist there is only one view point, if you refuse to listen to criticism, if you are prepared to defend it through violence, then you are in the territory of fundamental doctrines...and this is threatening to all of us who would like to create a genuinely cosmopolitan dialogue across the world" (1999, 15). This is exactly what the novels seem to suggest as well.

Linda Hutcheon, who has done a great deal of work in analyzing postmodern fiction, argues a similar thing. In *The Politics of Postmodernism* she writes, "Postmodernism is characterised by this kind of incredulity toward master or metanarratives (illusory ideas)...Whatever narratives that once allowed us to

think we could unproblematically and universally define public argument have now been questioned by the acknowledgement of difference" (1989, 7). We can no longer generalize or globalize ideas and use them to draw conclusions for everybody. Giddens and Hutcheon argue for a 'new world order' that demands the problematizing of all that is known and certain, and the acknowledging of multiple perspectives.

But Giddens does later ask the question, in the context of a world without absolutes, "What do you identify with: what kind of group, where should you locate your emotions, how can you generate passion in a contemporary world?" (1999, 16). These are questions that Jeanette and Sethe, in particular, keep asking. Postmodernity implies that nothing is sacred and that 'every belief is revisable' (Giddens, 1999). Such a world, if that is a true reflection of our 'postmodern condition', leaves us with a yearning for home, for somewhere else.

"I could have been a priest instead of a prophet," thinks Jeanette in *Oranges* (156). "The priest has a book with words set out. Old words, known words, words of power. Words that are always on the surface. Words for every occasion. The words work. They do what they're supposed to do; comfort and discipline. The prophet has no book. The prophet is a voice that cries in the wilderness, full of sounds that do not always set into meaning." Does the priest symbolise the extremes of Christianity and the prophet the more postmodern perspective? Does the voice that speaks words that do what they're supposed to do, have

nothing to say to the voice that's full of sounds that do not always set into meaning? Can the priest and the prophet share ideas, and perhaps realise that their differences are not so stark? That the prophet and priest together may be able to lead us to the fantasy character, Winnet's, utopian city where everyone must be 'strong and healthy' with 'compassion and wisdom, and where truth mattered and no one would betray' (*Oranges*, 154).

I mentioned earlier that Fuentes described postmodern narrative as being 'unfinished', a place where 'realities that are normally separated can meet, establishing a dialogue encounter, a meeting with the other'. As these novels invite us to engage in unfinished dialogue, likewise, this thesis invites you into an unfinished dialogue. It is a dialogue in tension: postmodern thought and the Christian faith. It is a dialogue not without conflict, not without opposition. It is also a dialogue that leads to no resolution, no ultimate answer. It is a journey for the sake of the journey, not the destination. And it is a necessary journey if we are to establish a 'dialogic encounter, a meeting with the other.' Please come with me on this journey.

Chapter 2

Space

"124 was spiteful. Full of baby's venom" (3). This is the opening line of *Beloved*. It describes the kind of space in which the novel plays out, 124 being the name of the house in which the central action takes place. When Paul D enters 124, eighteen years after last having seen Sethe, the first thing he says is, "Good God, what kind of evil you got in here?" (8). Throughout the novel, Morrison pays careful attention to describing the spaces of the novel, each described space having a significant role to play in drawing the reader into the harrowing experiences of slaves in the United States in the 1800's. And the spaces of the novel, from the first sentence until the last, somehow rotate around Sethe's ghost-daughter Beloved, as will be explored in greater detail later.

In this chapter I will begin by arguing that postmodern narrative strategies use space in a way that is different from previous literary dealings with space. Jeanette Winterson, in her preface to *Oranges*, describes it as a narrative that develops in spirals rather than 'straight lines' (xii). I would like to argue that the kinds of issues Morrison and Winterson are dealing with in their novels are too complex and twisted with too many layers of human experience and emotion, for them to follow a prescriptive sense of time and space. The kind of narrative strategy they use forces the reader into direct confrontation with the harrowing experiences of the characters in the novel. Following on from the previous

excerpt from *Beloved*, as Paul D continues to walk into 124, Morrison describes that "a wave of grief soaked him so thoroughly he wanted to cry. It seemed a long way to the normal light surrounding the table...A kind of weeping clung to the air" (9). What this chapter will suggest is that such human emotion does not exist in rational and organized space.

In order to understand exactly what postmodernism does with space, it may be useful to consider the other extreme of how to conceptualize space. In *The Pearly Gates of Cyberspace*, Margaret Wertheim examines space from premodern times through to cyberspace (1999). She argues that from the time of Galileo through to the discoveries of Einstein, reality was founded on an understanding of space grounded in scientific theory, but that with the advent of postmodernism, we are confronted with multiple perspectives of space and time. She says that postmodernism demands of us that we understand space as being more than the Western, scientific perspective of it. In fact, that postmodernism arguably takes us closer to an understanding of space that was accepted in Medieval times. Wertheim describes the space as understood by pre-Renaissance thinkers as being dualistic – where reality was described by both 'physical' space and 'spiritual' space. She suggests that it is as if, with postmodernism, we have completed the full circle, and we are once again interested in a space which is more than purely the physical. In fact, space is not only described as being dualistic; Wertheim describes personal space, 'room to

move', head space, mental space, emotional space, physical space, hyperspace, 'space to be', and cyberspace, to name but a few.

Although Wertheim's research is not grounded in postmodern literary research, the way the novels deal with space does reflect more of the kind of space Wertheim describes as having replaced materialist understandings of space. The kind of space dealt with in *Beloved* and the other novels in question winds, knots and travels, as Winterson says, in complicated spirals. It doesn't always make sense. It takes us to where we may perhaps not feel comfortable. Winterson writes in her preface to *Oranges*, "*Oranges* is an experimental novel. Its interests are nonlinear. It offers a complicated narrative structure disguised in a simple one, it employs a large vocabulary and a simple syntax. This means that you can read in spirals" (p.xiii). And reading in spirals is, arguably, the only way to read human experience, which is hard to reduce to grammar rules and sentence structure. This is where postmodern literature breaks free from restrictions manifested in early-modernist writing. Postmodern philosopher Jean-François Lyotard writes,

> A postmodern artist or writer is in the position of a philosopher: The text he writes, the work he produces, are not in principle governed by pre-established rules, and they cannot be judged according to a determining judgment, by applying familiar categories to the text, or work of art. Those rules and categories are what the work of art is itself looking for. The artist or writer is working without rules in order to formulate the rules of what will have been done. Hence the fact

> that the work and the text have the character of an event; hence too, they will always come too late for their author. Post modernism would have to be understood according to the paradox of the future (post) anterior (modern) (in Appignanesi, 1989, 120).

Morrison and Winterson spiral their stories through their novels, in fragmented pieces, taking the reader through the mire of human suffering, through stomach-sick memories, horrific episodes, and the bizarre juxtapositions of human relationships. In *Oranges*, we are drawn from a real-time story of Jeanette through to the fantasy experiences of Winnet and back again. And in *Beloved* we travel from memories, to the here and now, to some surreal occurrences brought about by the appearance of Beloved, whose truths are impossible to unravel.

These novels are not merely experimental but reflect spaces of the 21st century. Wertheim describes these as virtual spaces and cyberspace. Derrida might describe this space as the space for play and for difference. It is space that defies definition, that is not static, that can be *moved* and *displaced*.

In *Beloved* we are exposed to a group of people, slaves, who are constantly being moved and displaced. Even in his free state, when Paul D moves into 124, he doesn't stay in one place but finds himself compelled to move, first from Sethe's bed to the kitchen and then from the kitchen to the cold room outside (114). And somehow, Paul D's moving from place to place, and even Sethe's

inability to move from 124 is wrapped up in the presence of her ghost-daughter, Beloved. As mentioned in the beginning of this chapter, from the start of the novel to the end, Beloved controls the space, influences the central characters, drives their actions. Beloved, whether truly the daughter Sethe murdered, now returned from the dead, or some girl who has been locked up and abused, represents in the novel, amongst other things, the longing for home – for 'home-space'.

This chapter will explore these many spaces in the various novels. First, it will examine physical space as the stereotypical opposite of postmodern space, focusing on *Knowledge of Angels* and *Oranges* for analysis. Second, using Derrida's terms, it will consider how space can be 'described' and 'transformed' analyzing in particular Morrison's *Beloved*. Third, it will look at cyberspace as a metaphor for postmodernism. And lastly, it will focus on home-space, which will bring us back the central concern of this thesis. Using Derrida, we will examine space beyond the boundaries, space for play and difference. And using Levinas, we will consider space for meeting with the other and the spaces we call home.

2.1. Physical space

"If the 'real world' consists of material bodies moving through Euclidean space, where does that leave God? If the underlying substrate of reality is just an empty, physical void, what place is there for the Christian soul?" (Wertheim, 1999, 30).

Before we can fully understand the modernist position, we need to backtrack a little to medieval times. Wertheim explains this period through the eyes of Dante, for whom spiritual reality was as real as physical reality. In fact, physical reality was understood and explained in terms of spiritual reality. Dante's hell, as described in The *Divine Comedy*, follows the medieval understanding of the earth. It was truly believed that at the centre of our earth, there existed hell, and that somewhere high above our earthly skies, the angelic realms really did reside. In this paradigm, physical reality was not only less real, it was also often perceived as a negative thing. The human body was far less significant than the human soul.

But as knowledge of our physical reality increased, and the skies above our earth were 'discovered' without finding God there, spiritual realities came into question. If heaven is not really 'up there' nor hell at the centre of our planet, can we still believe in God? As our understanding came to lie more and more with mathematical calculations, scientific observation and logical and rational argument, the 'space' for spiritual realities became less and less. In fact, says Wertheim, the purely materialist paradigm just leaves no room for 'soul' space. In the depths of the galaxies, we are merely one minute planet traveling aimlessly through time and space, and in all that endlessness, there is no God to be found (1999, 45).

Within this context, Palinor's atheist stance in *Knowledge of Angels* makes greater sense. He is not a heretic, as the island dwellers believe. He is merely a rationalist in the midst of fundamentalists. He argues with great clarity and logic that doesn't allow for any kind of 'spiritual' space. As Palinor says to his intellectual sparring partner Beneditx, "Your God is outside both space and time and beyond the universe," and is therefore completely unknowable (202). From his materialist paradigm he cannot begin to believe that one can pledge one's allegiance to something that is beyond the tools of human understanding. The ongoing debate in *Knowledge of Angels* clearly depicts the contrasts between the medieval and rationalist points of view. But these differ not so very much from the argument that later developed between Enlightenment philosophies and postmodernism, as will be discussed later.

Beneditx, who can think only from the paradigm of a dualistic reality, has his faith shaken by the powerful arguments of logic. "Your God explains too much," argues Palinor. "God's will could indeed explain why water runs downhill. But it would equally explain why it flowed uphill, if it did; it makes no distinction between what does happen and what does not. I cannot see, therefore, how one could use what happens as an argument for the existence of God" (192). For Beneditx, explaining the space around him in terms beyond the spiritual is completely astounding. And his eventual response is a deeply emotional one. "Hush, Palinor!" cried Beneditx. "These are great mysteries." And he begins to quote God's answer to Job, "Where were you when the world was created?"

Palinor, acknowledging that Beneditx is now operating from a space that cannot be understood from his materialist paradigm, replies, "I will hush...I did not mean to distress you. And you have retreated now, I think, to where I cannot follow you." From the depths of his spiritual understanding, with tears streaming down his face, Beneditx says, "Take off your shoes for this is holy ground" (194).

The weakness of the physical paradigm, the space as described by the scientists of the last two centuries, is that it is a homogenous space. The only space that exists is the one that is observed, measured, and calculated by scientists operating within the confines of the Western paradigm. Not only is there no room for God, there is no room for difference. "How could humans, with our emotions and feelings and our longing for love, be accommodated in such an inherently sterile space?" asks Wertheim (1999, 60). Scientists of the 21st century, such as Stephen Hawking, acknowledge that there may now well be eleven dimensions of space, and yet not one of these takes into account 'human' space, in terms of emotions, longings, beliefs, needs and so on.

This physical paradigm has not only affected the thinking of those outside of the Church. Within the Church itself, the consequences of a materialist way of thinking has infiltrated into the very way theology is practised even today. Certain elements of the Christianity Jeanette is confronted with in *Oranges* can be drawn from this same paradigm, and have had very destructive consequences. For example, the idea that there is one, homogenous truth, and one way of

understanding and interpreting the Bible has resulted in the marginalizing of alternative voices. The 'one way of interpreting the Bible' has traditionally been the Western way, which has resulted in a very one-sided, skewed reading of the Christian text. Out of the Enlightenment way of thinking about space as homogenous (amongst other things), developed Victorian morality; the patriarchal system was propounded; neat and established boundaries of right and wrong, good and evil were established. The rational logic of materialism resulted in a sterile environment for the scientists, but for the marginalized, a frighteningly legalistic environment for the Church. It is such an environment that aided the establishment of such fundamentalist groups such as the one Jeanette finds herself in, in Winterson's *Oranges*.

Jeanette's mother, her radiogram and her various religious contacts, embody many of the stereotypical practices mentioned above. On the second page of the novel, we find a reference to the 'peculiarities of exotic tribes' that Jeanette's mother keeps track of through missionary programmes on the radiogram. We get a very strong sense of right and wrong, good and evil, what is odd and what is normal. The boundaries are clear. "Enemies were The Devil, Next Door, Sex, Slugs. Friends were: God, our dog, Auntie Madge, The novels of Charlotte Bronte and Slug pellets" (3). And Charlotte Bronte's novel, *Jane Eyre*, has its ending changed to fit the perspective of Jeanette's mother. The boundaries are set and there is no room for dialogue. "My mother was wrong as far as we were concerned, but right as far as she was concerned, and really, that's what

mattered" (5). Being right, finding the one truth and insisting that there is no space for difference is the kind of thinking that developed in the Church within the context of the Enlightenment paradigm.

It is this that thinkers such as Derrida are reacting against. It is this prescriptive, narrow-minded interpretation and praxis of the Christian faith that leads people like Hamilton (1993) to argue that postmodern discourse has moved beyond concern for the religious. Yet Derrida doesn't necessarily agree with this. He argues for the idea of 'deconstruction'. He says we need to rethink and reimagine many of the concepts we have taken as given (such as 'truth' and 'space' and 'time' and 'identity'). But he goes further than that, and deconstructs the very language, words, marks on a page, that allow for such concepts to be. And he argues that as we rethink our text, we open up spaces to reimagine their meanings. In a clever little book about Derrida, Richard Royle writes, "If Derrida is the great thinker of 'our time' it is because he is concerned with a questioning and rethinking of what the phrase 'our time' could and should mean...Thus, thinkers such as Kierkegaard and Nietzsche are important to him, because they are, as he puts it 'thinkers of the untimely, who begin by putting into question the interpretation of history as development, in which something that is contemporary to itself – self-contemporary – can succeed something which is past" (p.8).

In Royle's book, which he writes for the Routledge Critical Thinkers Series, he explains how, according to the format of books in the Series, he should be listing

Derrida's 'key ideas'. But, in a Derridian sort of way he asks, what are central ideas? And he argues that perhaps one of Derrida's central ideas is that of decentering, which can roughly be described as the deconstructing of 'the centrism of language'. And moving away from a centre, is something that Derrida sees as positive. "Why would one mourn for the center? Is not the center, the absence of play and difference, another name for death?" (2003, 16). This is where modernism and Derrida differ: modernist thinkers might agree with Derrida that the idea of 'the center' is dissolving and they mourn it, as Nietzsche did. But Derrida sees it as something affirming rather than a loss. He does not say that the idea of 'the center' is not important. Rather, he believes that 'the center' must be described and transformed (these terms will be elaborated on later) (2003, 18).

In *Oranges*, it is clear that the last thing Jeanette's mother wants is a 'decentering'. Jeanette exposes the community to difference, but the community holds on tightly to that which is certain, known, and safe. It is a space however, that is wrought with contradictions, dishonesty, secrets, and fear. It operates according to strong hierarchies, a restrictive sense of moral good, punishment, guilt and sin. It is a space Derrida would describe as having 'the absence of play and difference, another name for death'. In this space, indeed, there is little room for dialogue with postmodern discourse.

To further illustrate the difference between homogenous space which is 'another name for death' and the kind of space which allows for difference, let's examine the ideas around perfection that Winterson describes in *Oranges*. "The sermon was about perfection and it was at this moment that I began to develop my first theological disagreement," says Jeanette. "Perfection, the man said, was a thing to aspire to. It was the condition of the Godhead, it was the condition of the man before the Fall. It could only be truly realised in the next world, but we had a sense of it, which was both a blessing and a curse. Perfection, he announced, is flawlessness" (58). This is followed by a switch to the fantasy story which is carried throughout the novel, where a prince is seeking a perfect wife. The prince says, "I want a woman without blemish inside or out, flawless in every respect. I want a woman who is perfect". Later he finds such a woman. "The woman was indeed perfect, but she wasn't flawless. She was perfect because she had a perfect balance of qualities and strength. The search for perfection was in fact a search for balance, for harmony" (60). Winterson pinpoints here the difference of perspective: the fundamentalist group demanded an absolute, a perfection, implying here boundaries, limitations, and exclusions. But what Jeanette yearns for is 'harmony and balance'. The postmodern voice is one that calls for the permeation of boundaries, the endlessness of possibilities, the engaging with difference (Derrida in Royle, 2003, 14).

This is the kind of space that postmodernism seeks to create. And Wertheim argues that it is being created because of the limited space the physicalist

paradigm demanded. "Just as artists have long realised the limited scope of linear perspective, so too must we recognise the limited scope of the physicists' 'pictures' of the world" (Wertheim, 1999, 219). And so we need to seek beyond the materialist paradigm for an understanding of space that allows for more realities, or a fuller picture of the complexities of the kinds of space we humans operate in.

2.2. Describing and transforming space

Text must be described and transformed, according to Derrida. In fact, the very act of describing text, does transform it. We are never reading text as it was intended to be read by its author. Every act of reading transforms the text into something other. This leads us to deconstruction, to what Derrida calls the 'earthquake' of reading text. "Even the most simple statement is open to fission or fissure," writes Royle. Deconstruction is about "shaking up, dislocating and transforming the verbal, conceptual, psychological, textual, aesthetic, historical ethical, social, political and religious landscape" (2003, 14). And this is exactly what postmodern thought is doing to Christian theology. It is not necessarily discarding the box; it is saying, look at the box that you're in: what are the possibilities within and outside of the box? What if the box were to move, to reshape itself, to realign itself, with its borders falling in different, other, places? It is this powerfully affirming process of decentering, deconstructing, describing and

transforming that postmodernist thought brings to the postmodern-Christian dialogue.

In *Beloved*, Morrison describes ways in which space can be transformed through the retelling and the rememorizing of events. Sethe's mother-in-law, Baby Suggs, takes the freed slaves through such a process of transformation in the Clearing. Here, they translate their harrowing experiences into a communal healing process. "When warm weather came, Baby Suggs, holy, took her great heart to the Clearing – a wide open place cut deep in the woods nobody knew for what" (87). It is in this space that the freed slaves enter into the process of transforming their broken selves into whole selves. With the encouragement of Baby Suggs, "children laugh, men dance, women cry, and then it all got mixed up. Women stopped crying and danced; men sat down and cried; children danced, women laughed, children cried, until exhausted and riven, all and each lay about the Clearing damp and gasping for breath" (89). In this quasi-spiritual space, boundaries filter away and people – broken people, humiliated people, people whose selfhood and dignity have been taken from them – begin to be restored. Thinking back to this, Sethe feels she wants "to be there now. At the least, to listen to the spaces that the long-ago singing had left behind" (90).

It is not a matter of leaving behind old thoughts, and discarding previous paradigms. It is not, as some theorists suggest, that postmodern thought has moved beyond the discourse of Christianity. It is rather that postmodern thought

opens a space for Christian discourse to be transformed into something more workable within our current postmodern reality.

Royle suggests that through Derrida's deconstruction, "The world could be so entirely different. Everything can be rethought: politics, ethics, religion, literature, philosophy, culture, society, identity, and subjectivity, nationalism and internationalism..." (2003, 16). And yet Royle argues that, "in an apparently paradoxical fashion, Derrida is at the same time also an avowedly conservative thinker, in the sense that he wants to 'keep things' and preserve memory. He loves history, he has a deep respect for tradition..." (2003, 31). He then quotes Derrida as saying, "I feel best when my sense of emancipation preserves the memory of what it emancipated from. I hope this mingling of respect and disrespect of the academic heritage and tradition in general is legible in everything I do'" (Derrida in Royle, 2003, 32).

In an on-line journal, literary critic Kimberley Davis describes Morrison as saying something similar in an interview: We cannot discard the old, the memories. We need to describe the memories, retell the memories, rememorize the memories and allow for them to be transformed in order that healing can take place (2002, 5).

South African author, Antjie Krog, describes a similar process of transformation and translation in her novel, *A Change of Tongue* (2003). She writes about South

Africa's former president, Nelson Mandela, having the powerful ability of using the old to transform it into something new. She describes how Mandela builds a structure identical to the Victor Verster prison in his vast lands in the Eastern Cape. She writes, "I marvel at the kind of man he is. The kind of man who would want to take the same construct, the very structure of imprisonment, pick it up, and put it down in the veld, in Qunu, in freedom...He doesn't simply rush for the new, he transforms the old, he forces it to adapt; even if it bursts here and there at the seams, or cracks around the edges, it has made space for the new. The structures of captivity have been transformed into the structures of freedom. It can be done. He has done it" (2003, 243). Derrida seems to argue for a similar route: transforming structures of captivity into structures of freedom.

In both Morrison's *Beloved* and McEwan's *Atonement*, the authors attempt to describe and transform tremendous events in American history. In an interview Davis cites with Morrison, Morrison speaks of the necessity to retell the African-American story. At the same time, she stresses that it needs to be retold in a new way. Writes Davis: "The desire to uncover the historical reality of the African American past fuels Morrison's fictional project of literary archeology ... Working to fill in the gaps left by the constrained slave narrative genre, she attempts "to rip the veil drawn over 'proceedings too terrible to relate'" in order "to yield up a kind of a truth" (2002, 5). Although this last phrase suggests that Morrison pursues authenticity in her historical renderings, Davis highlights that she accepts the poststructuralist critique of the idea of a single totalizing Truth or

History. While she sees herself as a creative historian who reconstructs, Morrison also works to deconstruct master narratives of "official history" in *Beloved*" (2002, 12). Here Davis stresses the importance of the describing and transforming process.

This process can be seen again and again in *Beloved*. The chapter on Identity will describe how Paul D and Sethe begin to re-own their captive lives. And on the other side, we see Jeanette's mother in *Oranges* refusing to allow any transformation to take place. Even when her entire world falls apart, all the 'do-good' organizations she supported turning to rot, she insists on trying to sustain that which is no longer there. As the news filters through that the owner of Morecombe guest house has 'taken to drink' and that 'The Society for the Lost' has collapsed, Jeanette's mother reaches for her headphones and, as she has done since Jeanette was a child, calls over the radio to make her missions report (171).

2.3. Cyberspace

Although none of the selected novels deal directly with cyber realities, postmodern conceptualizations of space lie very close to cyber ones. Cyber-theorist Sherry Turkle (1999, 292) says that the elusive ideas of French postmodernism only began to make sense when seen in application on the Internet. "I lived in a culture that taught that the self is constituted by and through

language...that each of us is a multiplicity of parts, fragments and desiring connections..." but these ideas did not manifest themselves in every day living (1999, 290). In reality, what Turkle says that she was seeing was the 'autonomous ego' in operation. But once on-line, she began to see multiple and fragmented selves; users who admitted to seeing 'real' life as just one more 'window' of an extended reality in cyberspace. "I split in my mind. I can see myself as being two or three or more," Turkle quotes one user as saying (1999, 291). To understand the kinds of space that have been created, in which the novels take place, it helps to understand cyberspace; and also to understand the subtle nuances in the dialogue between Christianity and postmodernism.

One could argue that cyberspace is an experimental field for postmodern ideas around space, time and the subject. Cyber theorist, Manuel Castells, describes how such things as hypertext and global networks have changed the very way space and time 'happen'. That the so-called network society we see developing in our current 'Information Age' is organized around 'new forms of time and space' (in Smith and Kollock, 1999, 399). Castells argues that although, for most people, these new forms of time and space are not the forms most people live in, they are rapidly becoming the dominant forms of our current society and thus do influence everybody. One could further argue that postmodern narrative strategies are heavily influenced by on-line writing and reading experiences.

Because of the fact that postmodern conceptualizations of space lie so embedded in cyber conceptualization of space, it is thus relevant to explore this 'experimental field' to further understand the kinds of spaces operating in the novels, and to explore some of Derrida's ideas around space. Hypertext, for example, could become a tool for deconstructing text; it allows words to evolve, to transform themselves into associated meaning or even random meanings. Derrida argues for a decentering; a 'playing' with boundaries. Cyberspace allows for exactly that kind of playing.

So in cyberspace we can begin to see what Derrida's theories might entail in reality. And some cybertheorists describe their cyberspace experiences with almost spiritual reverence. In Wertheim's book, one cybertheorist writes, "Here, spelled out in the nonsense word 'cyberspace' I had discovered numinous beauty; here in the visible architecture of reason, was truth. Everything that comes after this, even our appearance here today, is simply the methodical search of an object that declares its existence outside of time" (1999, 252).

Cyberspace has been described by Wertheim as being perceived as a 'sacred space' by many cybertheorists. William Gibson, author of the popular novel *Neuromancer*, writes, "Cyberspace is a consensual hallucination...People are creating a world. It's not really a place, it's not really a space. It's notional space" (in Kramarae, 1995, 38). And it's these kind of ideas – of being able to create a

world, of the real versus the constructed, of 'notional space' that McEwan, Winterson, Paton Walsh and Morrison all explore in the novels.

Just to highlight this idea in *Atonement*: there is a constant desire on the part of Briony to construct out of real events something that is understandable to her own mind, and McEwan keeps asking the question, 'what really happened', and is there such as thing as 'what really happened?' Near the start of the novel, for example, Briony observes a seemingly bizarre event between Cecilia and Robbie. They are at the fountain and her sister removes her clothes and dives into the pond. From Briony's perspective, it is difficult to see what is really happening. She has a moment of revelation where she begins to understand the complicatedness of 'other minds', that there might be realities beyond that which she experiences in the space of her own mind. And yet when she begins to record the story, she recreates it, and constructs an event quite different from the one Cecilia and Robbie experienced. And McEwan writes, "The truth had become as ghostly as invention" (40).

This dissolving of boundaries is what Derrida would call the area of 'play'. It is in this space that we can begin to perceive reality outside of the box, outside of the limitations of, often destructive, concepts and paradigms. He sees this space as something affirmative, something positive, rather than the frightening place some cyber theorists describe cyberspace to be. In Royle's book about Derrida, Royle describes how the Routledge Series demands that there is a section on 'key

ideas' and that these key ideas appear in a shaded box. Thus, in a grey-shaded box, Royle begins to question, in a Derridian kind of way, what is a box? Derrida writes, "What's in the inboxing of a box?" There is always a box inside the box and a box outside the box. He goes on to philosophise about frames, and borders. "Derrida is a thinker without borders," explains Royle. "Or rather, a thinker of the always divisible border" (2003, 12).

It is in these spaces, Derrida might argue, that there is the possibility for difference, for otherness. And yet, when one reads about cyberspace one does not only get a sense of a wonderfully free space where affirmative play is endlessly possible. In fact, Julian Dibbel gives a harrowing account of the rape of a woman in Seattle in cyberspace. This Seattle player of an on-line network game, LambdaMOO believed that she was in a safe space; a space where she could experiment with different personas, play with identity, and enjoy the freedom of moving in a world that she was participating in constructing. And yet she was confronted by a player who used this freedom to create a program that attributed actions to other players that they did not actually write (2001).

And so the Seattle player, who has written herself a character called 'legba', "suffered a brand of degradation all too customarily reserved for the embodied female" (2001, 203). As the discussion within this cyber community developed, 'legba' described her own surprise at how traumatic the experience was, even though it was not 'real'. With what she describes as 'posttraumatic tears

streaming down her face' she typed in what she would like happen to the cyber rapist, questioning the possibility of virtual castration (2001, 203). What followed this event, a first for cyber communities, was a universal consensus amongst LambdaMOO users for a set of rules and boundaries to be established. And as these rules began to be developed, there also developed a need to define the community, to regulate the community, to set boundaries within which the community could confine itself.

This fascinating study of an event in cyberspace brings several issues to light. Firstly, it shows how complicated and complex this 'constructed' world is and how it impacts on 'real' people in the 'real' world. Thus it shows that we cannot construct and create things outside of ourselves without it having some sort of consequence on real people and real events, as Briony discovered in *Atonement*. Secondly, it questions whether the blurring of boundaries, the endlessly 'divisible border', the decentering, the 'play', is all that it is set up to be. Our painful illustration of an event in cyberspace seems to point to the fact that at some point, space needs to bounded, regulated, defined. And what it also brought to light, which I did not mention earlier, is that there was a sudden need for this democratic, networked community to have some sort of hierarchical structure that would enforce the regulations, and ensure that wrong-doers were confronted with the consequences for their actions.

At no point am I suggesting that postmodern theorists advocate irresponsibility, or an anarchist society structure. But it is necessary, in our celebration of deconstruction, to consider the long term consequences, and its actual result, not in theory, but in real life practice. In *Atonement*, McEwan, like Dibbel, seems to suggest that in real life, this issue of unbounded space is a very difficult one that is not only liberating but has its own potential shackles. These are shackles that Briony carries for the rest of her life, shackles she tries to rid herself of through the rewriting of events. These shackles have something to do with responsibility, with consequence – and these two ideas relate closely to what our role is within a community. If Briony was all that mattered, and her mind the only one that existed, then she could construct away reality at her will. But it is the grappling with other minds, with 'the other', where our space begins to overlap with the other's space, that this issue of responsibility and consequence becomes paramount.

In Royle's book there is an interesting section titled 'be free' that considers Derrida's ideas of freedom. Derrida deconstructs the graffiti he sees on the wall that says 'be free' and points out the contradiction that exists here: "As an order, 'be free' tells you to be what you cannot be except in obeying this order: to obey the order to 'be free' is not to be free" (2003, 31). Going further than this, postmodern art theorist Nicholas Mirzoeff would argue that every space we enter cannot be 'free space' because it is 'historically and culturally determined' (1999, 104). Speaking specifically about cyberspace, he argues that cyberspace, like all

other spaces, carries with it the usual power struggles around the areas of class, race and gender. Postmodern play, and cyberspace, is thus not 'free space'. It is merely a new space which may or may not give opportunity to rethink these areas of oppression in our society.

In *Oranges*, the fantasy character Winterson describes, Winnet, keeps longing for a utopian city. "She had heard that there was a beautiful city, a long way off, with buildings that ran up into the sky" (149). Yet for every utopian heaven, there is also a hell, as Winnet discovers on arriving at this city. "If the demons live within they travel with you" (157). She also finds that the Wizard has tied a string to her button and he is slowly tugging her back. "There are threads that help you find your way back, and there are threads that intend to bring you back. Mind turns to the pull, it's hard to pull away. I'm always thinking of going back" (155). After this passage, Winterson enters into a rather abstract dialogue about living in multiple realities, that of the 'old' world (the world of her mother and the church community) and that of the 'new' world (the liberating freedom of a relationship with another woman, and a life unrestricted by the boundaries of sin and guilt). The new world is not the utopia Jeanette expects it to be. The old world is riddled with contradictions and pain. Neither is the horror nor joy she had perceived them to be. She finds she can exist in neither, and yet escape neither.

I would like to suggest that it is this kind of space that postmodernism headed towards. Neither the utopia technovisionaries had hoped for, nor the clearly

bounded world of master narratives and certainties. Like cyberspace, postmodern space seems to be a 'nowhere place'. And this nowhere place has a tendency to become rootless, without foundation, like shifting sands; a dangerous place to be standing. On the one hand an exciting place to be, where new dialogues can be engaged in, new voices heard; and on the other hand a place without direction, that is bound to fizzle away into a frightening nothingness where both God and self are dead (see the chapter on Identity).

Says Wertheim (1999), "Behind the desire for cyber-immortality there is too often a not insignificant component of cyber-selfishness. Unlike genuine religions that make ethical demands on their followers, cyber-religiosity has no moral precepts" (280). Cybervisionaries long for 'bodily transcendence' without responsibility. But as the novels under question make clear again and again, at the end of the day, every person wants atonement, wants to be accepted into a community. The utopian city is never what it seems to be. Winnet describes the utopian city: "If you drink from the wells, you might live forever...but there is no guarantee that you will live forever as you are. You might mutate. The waters might not agree with you. They don't tell you this" (156). The warning in Winterson's words is clear. We may travel into cyberspace, or postmodern space, with the 'desire to escape', but in fact, everything travels with us.

2.4. Home space

Let's travel back to the start of the chapter, where Sethe's ghost-daughter Beloved is described as symbolizing the longing for home space. At the start of the novel, Morrison describes Sethe's two sons as running away from 124 because it had become unlivable to them. For them, when the ghost of Sethe's murdered daughter began to haunt 124 it was no longer home. Shortly after the boys run away, Sethe's mother-in-law, the one for whom 124 was bought, dies, and Sethe and Denver decide to confront the ghost who has taken over their home. This ghost is the child Sethe beheaded, and for Sethe, Denver and Paul D, this ghost seems to hold together all their memories, all their longings, all their needs for home. It is only when they confront this ghost and come to terms with the beheaded daughter, that they are able to experience homecoming.

As the novel unfolds and the three – Sethe, Paul D and Denver – interact with Beloved, so the memories begin to pour out, in painful fragments. Slowly, we the readers, begin to piece together what happened to Sethe, to Paul D, to the men from the ironically named Sweet Home. A 'sweet home' is what all three, in fact, all four, including Beloved, long for. When Paul D first arrives, it is only to visit, and yet, for the first time in eighteen years, he finds himself longing to be somewhere permanently. Likewise, after Paul D's first night at 124, Sethe asks herself whether it would 'be alright to go ahead and feel ... to go ahead and count on something?' (38). When confronted about whether he plans to stay or

go, Paul D says to Sethe, "Sethe, if I'm here with you, with Denver, you can go anywhere you want. Jump if you want to, cause I'll catch you, girl ... go as far inside as you need to, I'll hold your ankles. Make sure you get back out. I'm not saying this because I need a place to stay. That's the last thing I need. I told you, I'm a walking man, but I been heading in this direction for seven years ... When I got here and sat on the porch waiting for you, well, I knew it wasn't the place I was heading toward, it was you" (40). What follows this is the gradual journey of both of them deep into 'the inside', into the memories that have been disremembered for so many years. The place they have both longed for is the place where they each will be safe – safe to trust, safe to love.

This safety, though, is constantly brought into question by the complexity of multiple needs, multiple relationships, and heavy memories. Denver envies Paul D and fears her mother's love is not enough for both of them. Paul D is threatened by Beloved and Beloved eventually even comes between Denver and Sethe. Paul D pulls right out of the situation, while Sethe, Denver and Beloved struggle to draw from their shared space enough love to go round. What breaks this endless cycle of need and being needed is Denver walking out of 124 and into the home of someone else to ask for help. And then the coloured community of freed slaves steps in. When they get to hear that Sethe's beheaded daughter has returned to suck her dry of all she has, they intervene by storming 124 in a group thirty-strong. What exactly happens here is ambiguous, but when Paul D returns to 124 sometime later, he finds the house 'unloaded' and quiet (264).

When Paul D walks to the front door and opens it, the sad red light that he had experienced at the start of the novel is gone. And a few pages away from the end we get a hint of the possibility of Sethe, Paul D and Denver building together a new space which they can call home.

The point of this long discussion of the role of home in *Beloved* is to illustrate that the whole issue of space isn't so much about whether the space is unbounded or with boundary. The issue at stake is whether it is the kind of space in which people can *be*. What the on-line community was seeking in Julian Dibbel's account was the freedom to be without prescriptions, without judgments, without fear. What each of the characters in the various novels long for is a space where they can experience acceptance, forgiveness, and home-coming.

In *Knowledge*, we are confronted with several spaces. There is the space of the island, which although a dualistic space in the premodern sense, is nevertheless a very closed space to dialogue. There is the rather mysterious space of Palinor's unknown island. It is nowhere to be found on a map, and yet it is represented as real by Palinor's presence, and his strange, rational and logical ways of thinking. There is the space that Beneditx moves in, 'sitting at the window of one of the highest painted caves', far away from all business and people, 'devoting himself single-mindedly' to understanding the space, or 'knowledge' of angels (55). There is the space Severo is in, 'a whitewashed, barrel-vaulted cell entirely without anything but the essential, a strength and

quietness in his personhood' (35). There is the wide-open space of the snow-covered mountains where Jaime and the other island men discover Amara. There is the closed room in which Amara is kept which she longs to break out of. And then the mountains where she escapes to again, 'into the unbroken solitude of the inviolate snow' (284). All these places represent things, reflect the spaces people move in, the spaces in which they find their being.

How difficult to separate people from their places. Beneditx longs to stay in his cave, far above the complicatedness of everyday life, busying himself rather with the things of angels. And yet he is confronted with an entirely different space, the space of people needing his attention. While Beneditx is with the angels, a person with Palinor's ideas seems preposterous. But on meeting Palinor, and debating with Palinor, and developing a deep respect for this questioner of all that he believes, the space Palinor takes up becomes more immediate. At no point in the novel does Beneditx entirely enter Palinor's space; nor does Palinor enter into Beneditx's space. But Paton Walsh subtly blurs these spaces just enough to bring questions to the mind. Beneditx, at the end of the novel, when Palinor's death at the stake is a certainty, says he still believes in angels, but not in their necessary goodness. "He could kneel, and he could wind words through his mind: 'Out of the depths I have cried unto thee, O Lord; Lord hear my prayer'" (275). But, writes Paton Walsh, "On the far side of space and time his God could not hear him" (275). And Palinor, before his death, "in the last hour before dawn, longed to believe and even attempted a prayer" (279). Here, the spaces in which

Beneditx and Palinor operated in become complicated and what seems to be emphasized, ultimately, is the need to operate within a space within which real dialogue, real relationship with people, is possible.

After Severo has his first conversation with Palinor, his first experience of a space outside of the restricting island space, he experiences not happiness – something far sharper and more challenging - joy' (82). He then goes on to remember another time that he experienced such an emotion, when he had traveled on a 'foreign mission' to lands outside of the island. During these travels he had come across a new peal of bells being hung at the Ouderkerk in Utrecht. The clerk of the works had taken him to the top of the tower to see the new bell "and had shown him how if you struck the new tenor bell smartly with a piece of wood and then quenched the chime at once with a damper , you heard the old one, unmoving, still as death, giving voice, very faintly, a just discernable deep resonance on the quiet air" (83). And a little later in this passage, Severo thinks, "Something in his soul was ringing with an answering resonance to a note struck by Palinor ... he knew no name for such a feeling. He would not have called it love" (83). The reason I describe this passage at length is that I believe the 'resonating bell' symbolism which is repeated at further intervals in the novel, along with the very title of the book, *Knowledge of Angels,* points towards a verse from the Bible, "If you speak in the languages of men and even of angels, but have not love, you are no more than a clanging bell or a resounding gong" (Corinthians 13:1). This is a truth that Beneditx has to confront firsthand. It is not

about the 'knowledge of angels' but about that thing called love that Severo, Beneditx and Palinor begin to experience for one another.

The space for people is always a messy space. And as spaces become multiple, advocating a homogenous space for belief becomes questionable. Can one still argue for a 'true' religion and what are the consequences of pluralism? Harries, in *Questioning Belief*, writes about living in the 'borderlands'. Although one has pledged one's allegiance to one country, while living in the borderlands, one might sometimes experience a greater affinity to one's neighbouring country than to one's own. This seems clearly to be the case between Palinor and Beneditx. They are no longer staunch advocates of their respective spaces. Through dialogue, they have begun to move towards each other, into a new space. This is what postmodern theologian, Graham Ward, argues postmodernism is doing for us. Says Ward, "In such reorganization of space, time and bodies, theology can engage with postmodern debates" (1998, xxiii). And yet there are consequences of this new space, and we have still a great many things to learn about how to operate within these new spaces.

It is easy to begin to lose sight of people when conversing with angels, or even when operating within the sterile space of rational thought. You are soon no more than a 'clanging bell or a resounding gong'. Without love, you are nothing. Steering clear of any form of sentimentalism, when grounded in love, all space has the potential to be people space. What Dante foresaw in his heaven was

this: "All directions and dimensions fuse. In this single point of infinite love is contained the whole of space and time. No words can explain the place that is nowhere, the point that is everywhere. No metaphor can describe the fusion of body and soul into the Oneness that for medieval Christians was the source of everything. Body-space and soul-space have been melded into one-space. The mystery is beyond intellection" (Wertheim, 1999, 73).

Earlier I described cyberspace as a dangerous 'nowhere'. Wertheim (1999) uses the same term to describe Dante's Christian space. And yet Christian space is different because it is rooted fundamentally in 'people space', in what Levinas calls 'the trace of the other'. Although this will be expounded on in depth at a later stage, it is for now important to understand that all these many spaces become dangerous unless rooted in people space. From premodern to postmodern understandings of space, from Dante's heaven to cyberspace, there is a tendency towards getting lost in space without the secure grounding in community.

When let loose from her community, what Jeanette in *Oranges* longs for most is a new connection with people. She longs to be loved until death, to have her needs met, to operate within the security of people space. Likewise, in *Beloved*, the space that brings healing is the space within community. It is in the Clearing that people are restored to wholeness. It is through the combined efforts of the liberated slave community, at the end of the novel, that Sethe is saved from her

own possessive madness. When the thirty neighbourhood women arrived at 124, Sethe says it was like the Clearing coming to her again, with 'all its heat and simmering leaves' (261). And it is only when Paul D stands alongside her death bed, offering to share his 'tomorrow' with her, that Sethe can begin to come back to life again (273). When grounded in people space, all places are safe spaces.

It is in the sharing of our brokenness, in exposing our wounds, in becoming vulnerable, in allowing people into our spaces and entering theirs, that healing and wholeness can occur. Deep theological debates are ongoing around the areas of pluralism and religious tolerance. Postmodern theorists are deeply concerned with the idea of the 'Other' and the destructive power of the Self. And yet somehow, amongst these discussions, when operating with humility and sensitive self-reflection, in the realm of people space, a meaningful dialogue may be engaged in, between Christianity and postmodernism, that will take us to restorative spaces where the acceptance of the 'Other' and redemption may begin.

Chapter 3

Time

"Time is a great deadener. People forget, get bored, grow old, go away...History is a string full of knots, the best you can do is admire it and knot it up a bit more. History should be a hammock for swinging and a game for playing, the way cats play. The best you can do is admire the cat's cradle, and maybe knot it up a bit more" (*Oranges*, 91). In the chapter titled 'Deuteronomy: The last book of the law', Winterson introduces us to the possibility that time and history can be 'played' with and deconstructed. Although, at this early point in the novel, Jeanette is still snug in her church community, things are beginning to unravel at the edges as her relationship with Melanie deepens. Winterson begins to suggest to us that there is more that is being unravelled than Jeanette's position in her community. Here Winterson scratches the surface of the postmodern position concerning time, history and reality.

As with the chapter on Space, this chapter will start with examining the somewhat stereotypical antithesis of postmodern concepts of time, exploring the idea of time as linear, taking us through a certain History with an infinite end and absolute meanings, and the destructive consequences that have resulted from this kind of thinking. We will then begin to unpack the postmodern ideas around time which include Derrida's deconstruction and Elizabeth Deeds Ermarth's time as rhythm. Again, as with space, it will be shown that a negotiated understanding

of time that lies somewhere between these two binary opposites is more beneficial to our dialogue. One such negotiated position is suggested by postmodern critic Linda Hutcheon under her concept 'historiographic metafiction'. Historiographic metafiction describes how an event is grounded in real life events and experiences, but is nevertheless also a construction, or an interpretation. Christian philosopher Michel de Certeau will be used to support this view as he describes Christianity as being both grounded in an historical event (the birth, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ) but also re-interpreted by faith communities again and again through time.

What will be discovered, on this journey through time, is that time is not so much a line punctuated by events, but rather multiple narratives punctuated by human relationships and human experiences. Theologian Bernard Zelechow develops a convincing relational model of time that will be used to illustrate my point as it arises in the novels. As was pointed out in the chapter on space, it is the human and relational on which such concepts as space, time and identity pivot. Reading into time from this perspective opens up a space where both postmodern thought and Christianity can dialogue.

3.1. History according to linear time

The conceptualization of time is very much related to the understanding of space. Thinking back to Wertheim's travel from premodern soul spaces through to

postmodern cyberspace, we can make a similar trek from premodern 'heavenly' time through to postmodern rhythms (Wertheim, 1999). Postmodern theorist Elizabeth Deeds Ermarth argues that the beginning of History and time as we know it can be drawn back to the Renaissance painters (1992). Prior to this period, premodern artists painted within quasirepresentational space, with their works holding competing vanishing points which differed according to where the viewer was standing. But with the invention of single-point perspective, a profound change in human thinking came about. Suddenly, a common horizon was created in painting that all viewers saw regardless of where they stood in relation to the painting. Within the homogenized space of the early modern era, there developed the idea that time was a neutral, homogenous medium (Ermarth, 1992, 26). As with the painting, people began to look at time from a single-point perspective, seeking out 'common horizons'. Measurements were made between the past, present and future, and all relationships were explained in terms of a common horizon (Ermarth, 1992, 27).

In History, writes Ermarth, all temporal perspectives agree, thereby achieving the common horizon artists insisted upon, but now not only in pictorial space but also in time (1992, 27). So the understanding of time was that it was a neutral medium, and history, likewise, an objective, universal narrative that drew all of life and reality together. Suddenly, History (now with a capital 'H') was given enormous power. This power has profound effects on our thinking, and influences every other area of human life. Our entire education system, for

example, is based on 'what happened'. But very little thought is given to the narrator behind the 'what happened'. This is the kind of idea that McEwan is playing with in *Atonement*: the absolute power that is given the author or narrator to tell the story of 'what happened'. The narrator is non-individual, and the threads of history drawn together by an unidentified, collective consensus. "Any historical event," writes Ermarth, "has a single homogenous time stretching to infinity, carrying in its powerful current absolutely everything" (1992, 28). She goes on to say that no atrocity remains unexplained, no mystery unsolved, no mistake unrectified. Whose infinite power is this? Ermarth quotes Heidegger as saying that Historical time is the time of 'Nobody', 'nobody' referring to its anonymous narrators (1992, 30).

In *Knowledge of Angels*, we can see how characters in the novel seek to draw together all the many disruptive events on the island into one common horizon. Severo and Benedítx seek to link everything, from Palinor's falling into the sea, to Amara's wolf-like existence in one grand narrative that will explain the reasons for everything. The purpose here is not only to restore order to their lives, but to continue to instill the belief that everything that happens is part of a predestined plan of God. This is not only History with a capital 'H' because objective fact says so, this is History with a capital 'H' because it carries with it divine purpose. "There is no such thing as accident," says Severo. And Benedítx replies, "An accident as far as human purposes are concerned. But out of it good may come; we may find proof absolute that every soul knows God" (85). If Amara proves to

have an intrinsic knowledge of God, then Palinor can be executed without any bad conscience on the part of Severo and Beneditx, and Amara's life will have had a purpose. Very neatly, Beneditx draws all these unrelated, chaotic happenings together, and threads through them meaning and divine purpose. How often are not the many unrelated happenings of history drawn together in this way, to be used to make decisions about people's lives; to build upon theories that decide the future; to prove with evidence that one course of action is better than another. There is no greater teacher than History, would say the modernists. And yet who has pieced together this history, as Beneditx has carefully pieced together the story of Palinor and Amara's past, present and future? Who has decided which facts are 'true' and which are non-essential to the purposes of history?

Already, the grave dangers of this kind of concept of time and History are evident, and the criticisms against such concepts mirror certain critiques of the Christian faith. Operating in a linear time, where past events inform present decisions and future actions, one's reading of the past is enormously powerful. History, says Ermarth, depreciates the question of value (1992, 36). The idea that time or history could possibly be neutral deceives us into thinking it is therefore safe as a method of ensuring control and justice. Neutrality is a pretence that hides the fact that certain events, people and facts were recorded more prominently than others, that facts are embedded in meaning, that the many narrators of History are making value choices all the time. That authority,

for example, is embedded in cultural meanings. Paton Walsh reveals this cleverly, when Benedikx' neat experiment entirely fails. He has not taken into account the messiness of events in the present, the possibility that his 'divinely predestined' plan may in fact be merely a construction of his own doing, a power that he had no right to wield (a power he wielded in the name of God). Amara has never heard about God. The nuns are instructed to teach her language, but not teach her about God. But as one of the nuns says, "Perhaps [Severo] does not realise that the longer we keep [Amara] here the more certain it will be that the answer is contaminated...She lives amongst us, God is our everyday concern" (210). Apart from this, the nuns are horrified that Amara is merely part of some intellectual experiment, and feel betrayed by Severo. What is evident in this is that History allows little room for compassion and humanness, that the gathering of facts and evidence, and using these facts to draw conclusions in the present and future, is not only dangerous and destructive, but in many cases quite inhumane. The examples are endless of the times religion its adherents' purposes and plans in History have been used to create havoc in the world.

Apart from this serious critique of the value-ridden nature of a supposedly neutral History, Ermarth outlines another problem with this linear concept of time that postmodern thinkers seek to overcome. And that is that History is unable to accept its material limitations. The idea of History insists on an estrangement from the present, and demands continuously that we remain thinking about the past and planning for the future. In History there never seems to be a 'now and

here', but always a 'then and there' (Ermarth, 1992, 30). Linear, developmental, historical thinking trivialises the specific detail and finite moment, says Ermarth (1992, 31). Every present moment has to be partial so that we can pursue development and seek completion – a completion that will never happen, as the linear progress of time demands a future into infinity. In this paradigm, it is easy to ignore (trivialize) the realities of the present due to some future expectation of a solution. In this way, the present plight of Amara (being trapped in a small room, hating every moment of captivity) can be sacrificed for the greater good of a future purpose. A similar conclusion is drawn in *Oranges*, where the temporary suffering Jeanette is to undergo when being punished for her relationship with Melanie, is seen as necessary for the greater good in the long term.

A relational model of time – a model that favours the human and the relational over and above events and the 'facts' of history – is also one that is rooted in the here and now. Christian philosopher, C.S. Lewis, writes that when we live in the here and now, in the present, we are closer to eternity than if we are positioning ourselves in some future reality. In *The Screwtape Letters*, Lewis has an older devil write letters to a younger devil, advising him on how to lure his 'human subject' away from Christianity. The older devil writes, "The humans live in time but our Enemy [the God of the Christian Bible] destines them to eternity. He therefore wants them to attend chiefly to two things, to eternity itself, and to that point of time which they call the Present. For the present is the point at which time touches eternity. Of the present moment, and of it only, humans have an

experience analogous to the experience which our Enemy has of reality as whole; in it alone freedom and actuality are offered them. He would therefore have them continually concerned either with eternity ... or with the Present – either meditating on their eternal union with, or separation from, Himself, or else obeying the present voice of conscience bearing the present cross receiving the present grace, giving thanks for the present pleasure" (1976, 77). Lewis uses religious language here, but the point being made related to this thesis, through both what Lewis and Ermarth are saying, is that the here and now is where the postmodern and the Christian paradigm would both want to position themselves.

As mentioned in the introduction to this chapter, postmodern theologian, Bernard Zelechow, argues for a relational model of time rooted in the here and now. Rather than seeing history in terms of causality, Zelechow urges us to examine history in terms of the "human sphere in which *meaning and significance* take precedence over causality" (my emphasis) (1993, 135). History, says Zelechow, is the story of "human actions, of human purposes, of human relationships' (1993, 135).

Zelechow thus argues for a relational model of time rather than one of facts and events on a causal time line. He argues for what he calls a 'doing in the world'. Using Immanuel Kant, he writes: "Kant turns knowledge into a participatory doing in the world. Truth and interpretation as opposed to certitude becomes the watchword" (1993, 125). This distinction between interpretations as opposed to

certitude, is starkly clear in *Atonement*. Following Briony's 'crime' of blatantly lying about Robbie having raped Lola, she rewrites the history of Robbie and Cecilia. Although they both die in the War, she rewrites their past so that they in fact meet and live 'happily ever after'. McEwan makes us painfully aware of the difference between a causal history – facts and events recorded giving much care to details and to getting all the relevant bits of information exactly right – and a 'doing' in the world: relating to people, interacting with people, coming face to face with otherness.

Zelechow distinguishes between a Platonic understanding of time, which he criticizes for placing too much emphasis on reason and logic, and a Biblical understanding of time, which he argues emphasizes participation and relationship. He describes a 'critical' and 'self conscious' history that is based on "participatory knowledge, a reflection on the past taking 'otherness' into consideration" (1993, 126). Thus, we need to change our concept of history from viewing it as an 'official ontology' to something which is collectively reflected upon, with a desire to understand it in the present. As Zelechow writes, "History is a critical, self-conscious examination of the 'official ontology' and the layers of repressed content in order to incorporate the burdensome past into a conscious present that allows for cultural and personal transformation that points to a liberating future" (1993, 128).

A critical, self-conscious history always needs to be reconstructed in the present for it to be relevant or redemptive. In a way, this is what Briony is attempting to do. She is attempting to reconstruct the past in the present through rewriting what happened. However, she is doing it alone rather than in participation with others, again avoiding coming to terms with 'other minds'. According to Zelechow's model, we are dealing with an understanding of time and history which is entrenched in postmodern thought, and nevertheless transcends its potential nihilism in the redemptive hope it offers. If history is viewed as neutral, as the moderns argue, then it has lost its meaning. But if history can be viewed in terms of the meaning and significance it holds in the present, through participatory understanding, then it has a purpose for humankind. Zelechow suggests that "History is the critical liberating redeeming appropriation of the past into the present with an eye to the future" (1993, 126).

The Biblical conception of history is one whose God is 'doing' in the world. The Biblical narrative is fraught with examples of personal encounters with God and the self-conscious remembering of these encounters – not in a ritualistic way, Zelechow reminds us, but as a call to redeem the past in the present (1993, 132). The Biblical concept of time is not necessarily linear, nor is it a rhythm that exists only in the present, as Ermarth describes. Rather, it is a unified sense of time – unified in that we are redeemed from the past in the present while always operating within the realm of the eternal. God is both with us (embodied in the name given to Jesus Christ at his birth: Emmanuel: God with us) in the present,

in the 'now, and is yet always eternal and in the 'then'. He is alpha and omega, he is 'here and now' and 'there and then' simultaneously. This view of time and history transcends the postmodern one, allowing for the possibility of redemption.

If redemption from the past is possible, then Zelechow says, we can change the past. The past is not set in stone as modern historians suggest. Rather it is reinterpreted in the present according to the actions we take (1993, 130). Briony fails to redeem herself from her past as she insists that the past 'doesn't matter'. Sethe, on the other hand, moves towards redemption in that she 'appropriates and incorporates' the past into the present. She insists on re-membering the past in the present for the purpose of being able to 'pass it on' towards a liberated future. This may be a simplification of the enormity of the process of redemption, but highlights the fact that redemption is possible only through the acknowledgement of the past in the present.

Historical time is thus not measured according to mathematical division but by significant relationship – this is the kind of time Biblical narratives follow. It is the participation of 'human self-consciousness' that transforms the meaning and significance of history (Zelechow, 1993, 138).

3.2. Problematizing postmodern time

Zelechow's central criticism of the postmodern conceptualization of time, is that although it deconstructs time allowing for the reconsideration of the destructive nature of time as causality and a certain History, it nevertheless does not favour or emphasize human relationship and the potential for redemption. This leaves the postmodern conceptualization of time in danger of becoming nihilistic.

Let's explore this considering *Knowledge* and *Atonement*. Both novels are grappling with the idea of atonement or redemption in or through time. In *Knowledge* one could argue that Beneditx is trying to find some sort of a justification for either setting Palinor free or allowing him to die at the stake. The complicated 'test' using Amara is put in place almost solely for this reason. As mentioned before, Beneditx tries to draw all the events of the novel into a unified set of causes and effects. But Paton Walsh questions this way of reading into time and history from the very first page. In the prescript that was quoted at length in the opening chapter, Paton Walsh forces us to be consciously aware of our position as reader.

This piece immediately brings several questions to mind. Instead of being lured into the novel under the pretence that it is 'what really happened' and a certain version of the 'truth', it brings to the readers' attention that we as readers are in a 'God-like' or angelic position (a point McEwan raises as well). For us, the time

that we read the events is the present; yet for those in the novel the events are in the past, 'irrevocable'. Paton Walsh brings to our attention a complication of time, events and history that disallows us the comfortable reading of a story set in stone, with a certain meaning, a certain ending.

McEwan, similarly, questions the role of time and history in *Atonement*. Time and reality, rather than being a certainty, become a creative process in which the reader, writer, player, is actively involved. Briony is constantly, self-reflectively, in the process of creating events, time and reality. Near the beginning of the novel, while reflecting on the 'problem of other minds', Briony begins to think about the writing process. She stresses the difference between a written story and a play. A story could have its pages "bound – in that word alone she felt the attraction of the neat, limited, controllable form she had left behind when she decided to write a play" (37). In a story, argues Briony, what you wrote was what the reader believed and accepted. "You only had to write it down and you could have the world" (37). McEwan is highlighting in this passage the power of writing in its unconscious form; the power it has to create worlds and make them believable and unquestionable.

What follows Briony's thoughts about writing is the scene where Briony watches the unusual interchange between Cecilia and Robbie at the fountain. "The sequence was illogical," thinks Briony, as she watches Cecilia climb into the pond. "Even as her sister's head broke the surface – thank God! – Briony had her

first, weak intimation that for her now it could no longer be fairy-tale castles and princesses, but the strangeness of here and now" (39). Briony realises writing for her can no longer be about pretence, but only about the urgency of the present moment. Such writing, Briony goes on to think, need not have a moral, apart from the 'moral' of allowing you to perceive the world through different minds as they experience the present moment. Play writing reveals to Briony the role of the curtain; of how all text is collectively mediated and constructed, and is certainly not the creation of only one mind imposed on all its readers.

Later in the novel, we find Briony at the island temple where she begins to realise the complicatedness of other minds, 'the hopelessness of pretending' through writing. She puts her 'playwright' self to death and then decides she will "simply wait on the bridge until events, real events, not her own fantasies, rose to her challenge, and dispelled her insignificance" (77). Like Paton Walsh, McEwan seems to be criticizing the kinds of pretences inherent in writing as if what the author puts in a novel is 'real'.

Going a step further than problematizing time, Ermarth compares postmodern time with jazz music. She argues that it is based on collective improvisation and continuous re-creation rather than on some kind of linear, neutral, universal medium. Time is thus immediate and 'now', rather than continuous. "As long as the writer writes, as long as the reader reads, as long as the player plays, there is time. The time ends with the play and with the next conjugation the next time

begins" (Ermarth, 1992, 47). The difference between a modern understanding of time and a postmodern understanding of time, says Ermarth, lies in the awareness of time. The one forgets that the time he 'keeps' is constructed, while the other is consciously aware of the creative premise of time (1992, 48).

The point of insisting on operating in the present time and according to rhythms is not merely to dissolve foundations purposelessly, argues Ermarth. It is rather to question, and redefine the foundations of a causal, supposedly neutral history (1992, 50). Although some versions of postmodernism insist they have no greater purpose or 'project' in mind, and are merely experimenting for the sake of experimentation, they are nevertheless working very hard in taking society out of its comfort zone in order to reflect on commonly accepted universals. And this is an important project. However, there are some serious problems with such a deconstructive approach. "History should be a hammock for swinging and a game for playing," Winterson writes (91). But just how much swinging can you do, before you lose the rhythm? How much playing can you do before the game is ruined? Losing the rhythm altogether is a danger postmodernity needs to take into consideration.

Ermarth highlights some of these problems. The first is that it is very difficult to maintain the individual subject when there is no continuous time. Rhythmic time exists only for a duration and then disappears into some other rhythm. Any 'I' exists, likewise, only for a duration and then disappears into some new state of

being (1992, 53). There is a constant awareness of multiple possibilities rather than one 'essential' self, following a logical sequence of events through time. This problem of identity will be discussed in more detail in a later chapter, but it highlights the problem of agency and moral responsibility.

The greatest critique against postmodernism is that it doesn't allow for any kind of universal, overarching rules. The reason why postmodernism seeks to undermine such rules is clear, when keeping in mind that such rules were created in an elitist, Western, male context. However, if they are replaced with nothing else (and what can postmodernism honestly replace them with without becoming imposing?), we begin to face severe problems of social restraint. As social theorists, Nicholson and Fraser, highlight, "Many genres rejected by postmodernism are necessary for social criticism" (1990, 26). Politically, we lose the power to identify and criticize 'macrostructures of inequality'. Some postmodern thinkers, such as Hutcheon, argue that the self-reflective process in itself is a restraint. Others, such as Jean-Francois Lyotard, would say that although there is no totalitising narrative, there are temporary contracts that act as a restraint (1983). However, neither of these answers deals with the magnitude of the problem of political dominance that we find in society along the lines of race, gender and class.

The thing is, as Briony discovers near the end of the novel, that there is no atonement without justice. There is no atonement without responsibility. There is

no atonement without the rules of 'what really happened' really mattering. Briony speaks rather disdainfully of the kind of reader who insists on wanting to know what really happened to Cecilia and Robbie. And yet it is the very undermining of what 'really happened' that denies Briony the atonement she nevertheless continues to seek (through rewriting and recreating what really happened).

It is superficial to suggest that postmodern thought is irresponsible and can only create anarchic relativism. Its proponents have the serious task at hand of questioning, rethinking, redefining, recreating those systems and rules in our society which are destructive. But they are constantly undermining their own process when they speak of experimenting purely for the sake of finding possible alternatives, playing with time, deconstructing History without giving us anything in return. We are left with a void which disallows progress. And progress may indeed not be important for the elitist Western thinkers in their academic ivory towers, but it is certainly important for the vast multitude of those that are marginalised. Postmodern thought, with regards to time and history, falls short when taking into consideration the importance of the accepting collective responsibility, for example, for events that took place in history, on a universal level. Postmodern thought brings to light the importance of acknowledging multiple histories, but disallows the redemption that comes from acknowledgement of those histories in some sort of collective, universal form within a continuum of time. The importance of history in telling people's stories,

and the redemption possible through time and history will be considered in the following section.

3.3. Photo moments: Historiographic metafiction

In *The Politics of Postmodernism* Linda Hutcheon describes in some detail the significance of the way we represent ourselves, our world and, in particular, our past (1989). She argues that the past can only be viewed through traces that we have available in the present. Like Ermarth, she sees the postmodern take on history as a reaction against the danger of viewing history as something that is neutral and universal. Hutcheon differentiates between the 'brute events' of history and historical facts we construct from those events. Every historical fact, is thus laden with meanings and representations, words behind words, ideologies and political power play (1989, 57).

Hutcheon's position is that postmodern thought is not anti-representational, but rather seeks to problematise representation. Postmodern writers do not seek to disconnect themselves from the world or history but rather 'foreground and contest the unacknowledged ideologies behind these'. "We cannot avoid representation," writes Hutcheon; "We can avoid fixing our notion of it" (1982, 53).

She suggests that postmodern novels often thematise this problematizing of history, and the process of turning events into fact, through the filtering and interpretation of archival documents. In *Atonement*, this is precisely what McEwan does, as Briony makes obvious the process of filtering archival resources. In Briony's interactions with the Keeper of Documents, McEwan makes us painfully aware of the 'pointillist approach' of having every historical 'fact' correct: "like policemen in search of a team, we go on hands and knees and crawl our way towards the truth", writes Briony (359). It seems as if Briony is acutely interested in getting history 'right', to the very last detail; and yet, when it comes to the greater 'truth' of what 'really' happened; suddenly getting the historical facts right doesn't matter so much any more. McEwan cleverly depicts here the very arguments Hutcheon is making: that historical 'fact' is really just representation based on traces we have of the past; and that any representation is mediated through our own political and ideological purposes.

It is interesting that McEwan further problematises the whole area of the past by playing on the concept of memory. Beginning with the blurring of Lola's memory of what 'really happened' on the night she was raped, through to Briony's impending loss of memory due to dementia in old age, we are constantly made aware that memory is, as with history and the past, not a 'fixed notion'. As historiographic metafiction suggests, the boundaries between historical events and our fictional narration of those events are not as clear-cut as we believe them to be.

Beloved is a novel that also falls under the historiographic metafiction umbrella, and it also plays on the idea of memory. In an on-line journal, Kimberly Davis has undertaken an in-depth study of Morrison's *Beloved*, particularly in terms of Hutcheon's historiographic metafiction. She argues that although *Beloved* "exhibits a postmodern skepticism of sweeping historical narratives, of 'Truth', and of Marxist teleological notions of time as diachronic, it also retains an African American and modernist political commitment to the crucial importance of deep cultural memory, of keeping the past alive in order to construct a better future" (2002, 4).

Davis unpacks several interviews journalists have had with Morrison, where she adamantly insists that her novel is not postmodern. She says that her novels play too important a role in reconstructing African American history to accept any deconstructivist approach (Davis, 2002, 5). As Davis stresses, history cannot be 'over' for the vast majority of marginalised groups whose histories still need to be written and recorded. She also stresses the fact that Morrison sees her recording of African American history (representational as it might be) as having a vital role to play in the healing of African Americans from their past (2002, 7).

As with the postmodern 'project', Morrison does attempt to undermine, or deconstruct, the totalitising metanarratives that embodied the modern period. She certainly wants to rewrite history in terms of 'other voices'. But her process

doesn't end at deconstruction. She rather wants to reconstruct histories in the present (Davis, 2002, 8).

Postmodern theologian Michel de Certeau makes a similar assertion in an essay titled, *How is Christianity Thinkable Today?* (1971). Grappling with postmodern readings of history in the Christian context, de Certeau argues that Christianity has a relationship to its inaugural event: the event of Jesus Christ. And this of course, is historical. But at the same time, Christian communities are constantly in the process of reinterpreting this event. Our 'reading' of the event today, can never be identical to the historical event, thus it is always different. In a foreword to this essay, Frederik Christian Bauerschmidt sums this up as follows: "Christianity is a relationship to a past event to which it must remain faithful, while at the same time being irreducibly and unavoidably different" (1997, 137).

Morrison is making a similar argument. On the one hand she is concerned with telling the many complicated stories of individual people; on the other, she is concerned with telling 'the truth' to Americans about their own history. Davis records Morrison as saying in an interview: "the past is absent or it's romanticised. This culture doesn't encourage dwelling on, let alone coming to terms with, the truth about the past" (Davis, 2002, 8). At another time she mentioned the importance of acknowledging the 300-year history of African Americans in their liberation process. In this interview, Morrison argues strongly against the postmodernist thought that has an historical "depthlessness" and "a

consequent weakening of historicity, both in our relationship to public History and in the new forms of our private temporality". Says Morrison, "Our children can't use and don't need and will certainly reject history-as-imagined. They deserve better: history as life lived." It is this that she attempts to capture in *Beloved*, history as life lived.

De Certeau's interest is with historiography and difference. He argues that the past can only ever be viewed as 'other'. But that this history of 'otherness' is obscured by historians who always want to categorise and organise it in such a way that it is the 'same'. But he believes that there are 'spaces of resistant practice' in which we can still find the 'otherness' of history – and in fact sees this as an important project. It is in these spaces of otherness that history can be reconstructed to have significance and meaning in the present (as Zelechow described) (1997, 136).

"The form of Jesus' death and resurrection is reproduced with different content in every Christian experience" (Bauerschmidt, 1997, 138). It is what de Certeau calls 'inter-locution', something said-between. De Certeau doesn't see this different interpretation as undermining the historical event, but rather sees it as giving the historical event meaning and significance in the present. Morrison's project as described in several interviews is exactly like this: a desire to reconstruct the past in order to have meaning in the present. The causality and linear sequences of history are less important than the human experiences. But

these (historical) human experiences which are certainly 'other' or different from how they happened then do matter. They matter not so much for being remembered as identical to how it was then, but they matter in terms of their redemptive power in the present. McEwan is quite right in suggesting that we cannot reconstruct the past as it really happened. His description of Cecilia and Robbie's experiences in World War II are enormously vivid and convincing. Yet he reminds us that these are mere constructions and we will never know what really happened. It is Briony's insistence that other voices don't matter, only her voice as 'author-God', that results in her not being able to atone for her mistake.

De Certeau argues that although we cannot 'colonize' the past into the present, we can self-consciously reflect on the past with the purpose of giving it meaning and significance in the present. It is of critical importance that African American history is resurrected, reconsidered, reconstructed; that lives lived are retold, for the purpose of healing and liberation. Postmodern thought seeks to liberate us from oppressive powers, and that is made possible through considering history and time through the above described Biblical conceptualization of these terms. It is through the combined understanding of these concepts – from both the perspectives of postmodern thought and Christianity – that a liberation from oppression, a redemption, and a true meeting of 'the other' is possible.

In *Beloved*, remembering the past, and reflecting on it in the present, plays a powerful healing role. Throughout the novel, there is a complicated struggle

between trying to forget and needing to remember. On the one hand, there are constant references to the fact that memories of the past can eventually strangle us, as Beloved strangles Sethe in the Clearing. And on the other, there is the important process of remembering everything through dialogue, as Sethe does with Denver, Paul D and even with Beloved. Says Davis, "Toni Morrison's novel endorses neither a Marxist obsessive, teleological historical remembering nor a "postmodernist" forgetting of the past, and suggests instead that both processes are necessary to move into the future" (2002, 6). In the final chapter of the novel, Morrison writes that this is 'not a story to pass on', signifying both the necessity of remembering it and not merely passing it by, and yet also forgetting the past and walking on into the future.

As with McEwan, Morrison is saying that although the past is constructed in our representations what matters deeply is *how* we represent it in the *present*. This statement is of paramount importance when we consider the debate between Christianity and postmodernism, as it highlights where the two may meet: acknowledging that history is representational, and yet understanding that this representationality does matter, and has enormous significance in the present. "One way to free oneself from the horrors of the past is to reenact and reconfigure the past in the present," writes Davis (2002, 9). This could also be rewritten as saying that one way to allow the past to have relevance is to reconfigure it in the present.

Davis warns us against too simplistic an idea of healing (2002, 11). She argues that Morrison does not paint a picture where everything is healed because the past has been resurfaced, discussed and 'reconfigured' in the present. Morrison does not fill in all the gaps of history, creating a complete narrative. Rather, she consciously leaves gaps, allowing the reader to actively engage in imagining history (2002, 12). It is as if the horror of the 'lives lived' is too much to explain in a simple, linear narrative, and in acknowledgement of never being able to truly represent these lives, Morrison has disallowed her novel from completing their story.

Davis suggests the following strategy concerning temporality: "a strategy of learning from the past but not being paralyzed by its lessons, of forging a loose and flexible synthesis out of the fragments of history, of reaping the benefits of both a diachronic and a synchronic sense of time" (2002, 12). It is this understanding of postmodern time, rooted in a relational model, that will be useful in the dialogue between Christianity and postmodernism.

Chapter 4

Identity

What does it mean to be human? What does it mean to have a self? This is a question philosophers have been asking through the centuries. In the following chapter this question will be explored. How has the self been viewed prior to postmodern thought? What is the idea of the self postmodern thought is reacting to? What is the postmodern self and what are the implications of this self? And lastly, how can the idea of the postmodern self play a role in rethinking the self within the context of the Christian faith?

In the chapter on Time, it was shown how the negotiated perspective between postmodern thought and Christianity does not see time as a series of causal events on a linear time-line, but rather, it sees time as a series of relational encounters between people and their God (from a theological angle), or perhaps closer to what Morrison described as 'life lived'. What makes the past significant in the present with consequences for the future are human relationships. And this is a conclusion we can come to through dialogue, or negotiation, between the postmodern and Christian perspectives.

In the following chapter, the matter under consideration is identity. It will be examined how from as far back as early Greek philosophy, principles of essentialism dominated thought about the self. This began to take even greater

significance with Nietzsche's announced 'death of God', which will be expounded upon a little later. The 'death of God' had profound implications for the perception of man, as suddenly man (and it really was 'man' and not woman) had to fill a large role. Through the advent of humanism and other philosophies, man began to be perceived as an autonomous agent who has a free will and is responsible for his own actions. This placed man in an extremely powerful position. Postmodern thought begins to question this position, suggesting that it is an illusion. It questions whether man really is a free agent, or whether he may perhaps be controlled by his culture, community or interactions with his environment. Further, postmodern thought began to question the whole concept of 'man' which led to thinking along the lines of gender, race and so on. As an extreme reaction to essentialist claims, we have the 'death of self'. Extreme postmodern thinking may question if we have a self at all, and may suggest that any self that we do have is fragmented, multiple, undefined, merging, and in transition. If we engage in the dialogue between Christianity and postmodern thought, we may be able to come up with something that is a little less extreme, a little more nuanced, and a little more useful for conceptualizing the idea of homecoming.

In the final chapter, we will consider Samira Kawash's insights in the area of essentialism and the danger of anti-essentialist theories. But for now, we will examine essentialism from one angle only – as a destructive conception of the self that postmodern thought seeks to counter. Kawash's ideas around the self

lead to a concept she calls 'hybridity' which is in fact very close to the 'self in community' I describe during this chapter.

It will be argued in this chapter that each novel is comfortable neither with an autonomous, 'essentialist' self, nor with an entirely fragmented, multiple self. Each novel brings to question the issue of responsibility, community, and of course, ideas around homecoming and meeting with the other. Thus this chapter will suggest a negotiated understanding of the self. Rather than an autonomous self or a fragmented self, we may in fact need to develop the idea of an heteronomous self: a self that is accountable to an other. Postmodernism and Christianity together, as exposed in the novels, may point us towards such concepts as a self in community, a self in dialogue, a self that can meet with the other.

Because the issue of identity is an enormous one, and the novels grapple with countless areas of the topic, from gender issues to race relations, I am going to focus my scope rather narrowly. The central hinge of this discussion will be around the area of the deconstructed self and the self in community. There may be some overlap with the very important issues of homosexuality, as mentioned in *Oranges,* and being black, as mentioned in *Beloved,* but these will not be my central concerns. The central concern is to develop an understanding of identity that takes both postmodern thought and Christianity into consideration, and allows for discussion about homecoming and meeting with the other.

4.1. Essentialism

The idea that things, or even people, have an innate quality that make them what they are can be drawn as far back as the Greek philosophy of Plato in 400 BC. According to Jostein Gaarder in his popular novel about philosophy, *Sophie's World*, Plato developed the 'World of Ideas' to try and explain 'why a horse is always a horse and not a crocodile' (1995, 66). Plato believed that the perfect 'moulds' for every thing on earth could be found in the 'world of ideas' and that this perfect mould held the innate quality that made something what it is. Although Enlightenment philosophers may not have accepted all of Plato's philosophies, the idea of things having an innate quality is still held as the basis of ideas about the self today.

From a theological perspective, in the time of Descartes it was even believed that the 'inner kernel of self' was a divine gift placed within each human being. This divine inner kernel is often referred to as the soul; the place where the essence of 'being human' resides. Philosophers such as Descartes and Kant may have defined this as 'human consciousness'. The philosophy of essentialism led to the belief that all human beings have this 'essential' inner kernel that makes them who they are. Thus, one could define a human being by trying to capture that quality that was constant, innate, unchangeable and so on, in that particular human being (Gaarder, 1995).

Such questions about essences are starkly evident in Paton Walsh's *Knowledge of Angels*. The experiment, on which the novel hinges, to see whether Amara has an innate knowledge of God, is in fact an essentialist concern. During the first conversation between Severo and Beneditx concerning Palinor's fate, Beneditx says the following, "Knowledge of God is inborn. Innate in every human soul. So powerful, so clear..." (60). He goes on to say that one who denies knowledge of God denies enlightenment, denies the truth that he once certainly knew. When Severo questions this, Beneditx attempts to 'prove' it to him by showing him the eyes of a newborn baby. He asks Severo what he sees in the eyes of the baby and Severo replies, "Infinity" (62). In response, Severo shows Beneditx Amara, and asks him to see infinity in the eyes of the wolfchild. Amara becomes the test of whether there really is an essential, innate knowledge of God in every human being or whether it is something learnt. As expressed in the previous chapter, it becomes clear that it is impossible to separate what is potentially innate from what is learnt, as the nuns comment on the fact that Amara is being kept at a place where God is on the lips of everyone all the time. Even were this not the case, one of the nuns points out that she may have been taught of God before being 'adopted' by the wolves. "If we could show that she had been in human society long enough before she was with the wolves, then if her answer shows knowledge of God, it will not prove that she has that knowledge inborn, only that she has remembered fragments of her earliest life" (211). Thus the experiment is complicated as members of this isolated community begin to understand that

things may not be so clear-cut but perhaps a messy combination of several forces at work. As essentialist certainties begin to unravel, doubts form in the minds of Severo and Benedítx whether Palinor truly is a heretic that needs to be burnt at the stake. It is the 'burning at the stake' on the basis of essentialist claims that have contributed to postmodern thinkers turning against such understandings of the self altogether.

Beliefs in essentialism also led to the belief that we are autonomous beings. We are independent of our environment, other people and our culture, with a free will and an ability to make our own decisions. What comes to mind here is the ideal Victorian gentleman, who knows his responsibilities and seeks to choose what is right. He fulfills all the requirements of what is expected of him, believing that he fulfills them independently of anyone else, and that he is a free agent choosing to be what he is. Along with such ideas are the belief in science, a homogenous space, a certain History and a causal timeline. There is the belief in man; that together with invention and technology, man can achieve anything. In the advent of enormous advancement in technological discoveries, the implementation of democracy, which encourages responsible decision making and power in the hands of every man, and the success of capitalism, such ideas are understandable. However, they have also had many destructive consequences, such as colonialism and slavery.

One idea behind essentialism is that we are all essentially the same. Essentialist philosophies seek to identify those things that are 'ideal' and drive everyone towards that ideal. Rowan Williams writes an interesting essay on this while discussing a theological critique on the subject of racism (1988). He writes that it is sometimes assumed that there is a basic 'inner' humanity which is the same for everyone. More often than not, what exactly this humanity is, is defined by the one with power. In *Knowledge* this inner humanity is the knowledge of God. The marginalised groups are swallowed into this overriding idea of what it means to be human and how this should be expressed. But Williams argues that "what we share as humans is not a human 'essence' outside history, but a common involvement in the limits and relativities of history" (1988, 142). Williams' words resound well with what Morrison was saying in the previous chapter, that human existence is 'life lived' in relationships, in history. In a very powerful statement, Williams says, "The only humanity we have is bound up in difference, in the encounter of physical and linguistic strangers" (1988, 142). There is no 'essential' human being who exemplifies what it means to be human. There is no standard to be attained, no one dominant group who can claim it has captured that 'essence' of what it means to be human. The only humanity that exists, as Williams says, is related to being different, being strangers. Christian history, says Williams, "ought to be the story of continuing and demanding engagement with strangers, abandoning the right to decide who they are" (1988, 147). This resounds powerfully with postmodern philosophies. French postmodernist, Emmanuel Levinas, for example, writes, "Being in direct relation with the Other is

not to thematise the Other and consider him in the same manner as one considers a known object" but rather to come to terms with the 'otherness' of the Other (in Beavers, 1996, 34).

It is due to the above mentioned destructive consequences of essentialist thinking and a shift in Western philosophy generally, that postmodern thought has attempted to completely deconstruct the idea of the autonomous subject. Beginning with the philosophies of existentialists such as Kierkegaard and Sartre, and with the controversial works of Nietzsche, philosophy began to take a turn away from this 'ideal man', in some cases taking it to the extreme of the 'death of self', as some postmodernist thinkers like to describe it. The following section will examine the extreme postmodern reaction to the autonomous subject, followed by a more nuanced understanding of postmodern thought on the subject of the self, according to the ideas of Levinas.

4.2. Death of self?

Many extreme post modern thinkers turn to Nietzsche for inspiration. He is argued to be the forefather of postmodern ideas. In his *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, he describes a man frantically wandering the streets with a lantern, asking the question, "Whither is God? We have killed him – you and I. How shall we comfort ourselves? Who will wipe this blood off us? What festivals of atonement, what sacred games shall we have to invent?" (in Hamilton, 1993). Nietzsche

powerfully describes where he sees the state of society going – towards one that can no longer sustain a belief in God. And yet one that needs some atoning force, something greater than itself (some festival, some sacred games) that allow humankind relief from itself. What followed the 'death of God' however, was the powerful sweep of humanism, and an overriding belief in man. As described above, democracy, capitalism, humanism and the like brought forward a new kind of 'religion' with a dependence on Science and man. But this has fallen through, and has been shown to be a façade, as described in the previous chapter. As with Beneditx, when he realises that all his firm beliefs are really just a sinking sand before Palinor's arguments, so the Enlightenment philosophies have been shown to be no more than a thin veneer hiding the vulnerable position of man and society.

Following the death of God, we now have what some postmodern thinkers describe as the death of self. Perhaps this can be best described when considering cybertheorist Sherry Turkle's ideas about cyberspace. She describes how cyberspace solidified 'Paris intellectual culture' (1999, 292). She describes cyber identity as being part of a larger cultural context embodying "eroding boundaries between the real and the virtual, the animate and the inanimate, the unitary and multiple self" (1999, 288). She continues to describe how complex on-line games called MUD's "make possible a creation of an identity so fluid and multiple that it strains the limits of the notion" (1999, 290). The ultimate postmodern self is sometimes described as a diffused self, a multiple self, a

decentered self. One MUD player says, "I split my mind. I can see myself as being two or three or more... Real life is just one more window" (1999, 291).

This is the extreme postmodern position, and it is one that many theorists have reacted violently against. Outcries range from questions of responsibility to concerns around accountability. They're questions that McEwan asks in *Atonement*, as will be discussed below. In a recent book dealing specifically with the self after postmodernity, critical theorist Frederic Ruff makes an interesting comparison between the postmodern self and adolescence. Although the comparison may undermine the magnitude of the issue under question, it brings some issues to light that will aid the discussion. He writes, "Isn't the adolescent self a powerful and valuable way to imagine ourselves? Doesn't it incorporate an awareness of our own strangeness, a defiance of absolutes, a willingness to experiment, a delight in cacophany, an emotional vulnerability, an awkwardness in the established ways of the world, a confrontation with a multiplicity of ruptures, a frank and confusing encounter with desire?" (Ruff, 2000, 102).

Using Ruff's analogy, herewith a discussion around the difficult transition from childhood into adulthood in *Atonement* that Briony, and, to a lesser extent, Cecilia and Lola undergo. And further, an examination of the constant struggle between order and disorder, controlled miniaturization and the messy magnitude of 'real life' that seems to underpin the novel. What the following section hopes to highlight is how the self would be viewed if we took certain postmodern

philosophies through to their extreme and what the consequences of this would be; consequences that McEwan himself seems to explore.

At the start of the novel McEwan stresses how Briony takes pleasure in ordering her little world, from the toys in her bedroom, to the complications of the adult world. "A taste for the miniature was one aspect of an orderly spirit. Another was the passion for secrets...Her wish for a harmonious, organised world denied her the reckless possibility of wrong doing. Mayhem and destruction were too chaotic for her tastes" (5). But the adults around her live far less ordered lives than she would like and as things start to become messy she begins a journey of vivid recording and rewriting in order to make the events more manageable, reducing the 'problem of other minds' to neat figures on a clean page.

When Briony is confronted with aspects of the adult world that she cannot make sense of (Robbie's sexual desire for Cecilia expressed in a single, explicit word: 'cunt') she goes to extreme lengths to restore order through a complex rewriting of events. It is while in that difficult adolescent stage, between childhood and adulthood, between minute order and the magnitude of a messy world, that, when confronted with too much 'adulthood' she in fact does become destructive, and does create mayhem. And the result is so chaotic, she spends the rest of her life trying to return order through the rewriting of events.

McEwan shows how the transition from childhood to adulthood is no easy one for Briony. The scene that plays out at the island temple, where Briony attacks the nettles with a hazel branch whip, is significant in this transition. And it is likewise significant that such a scene should play out outside the 'fake temple' which is saved from 'being entirely fake' by the fact that it is neglected and falling apart, as was mentioned in the previous chapter. Briony begins by attacking 'Lola' who symbolises for her someone close to her in age, yet moving ahead of her into the mysterious adulthood. Lola, who wears make-up. Lola who has authority in her mannerisms and voice. Lola, who has a maternal role in the lives of her brothers. Lola, who takes Briony's role in the play, and leaves her feeling patronized and very young. "This was Lola, and though she whimpered for mercy, the singing arc of a three-foot switch cut her down at the knees and sent her worthless torso flying" (74).

With violent sweeps at the nettles with her hazel branch whip, Briony proceeds to 'behead' every person and idea that baffles her child mind. Following Lola's symbolic nettle death is the short and uneventful death of the twins, as retribution 'granted no special favours to children', as Briony soon finds out for herself. This is followed by a swipe at the nettles that represent play writing, shallowness, wasted time, and the 'messiness of other minds' – "It was a weed and it had to die", thinks Briony (74). And yet, Briony is not done with her vengeance. With more swipes at the nettles, "she severed the sickly dependency of infancy and early childhood...She disposed of herself, year by year in thirteen strokes" (74).

What a powerful ritual of entering adulthood! "Flaying the nettles was becoming self-purification, and it was childhood she set about now, having no further need of it" (74). This expressive ritual is followed by the arrival of Leon, whom she refuses to greet in a moment of jealous independence. But as his trap passes her by, she feels regret and sadness.

It is fascinating to follow the thoughts of each member of the Tallis family, as each restores order in their own way. Briony does it through writing, and believing that her version of the story is the 'true' version, as a way of dealing with 'other minds'. There is a drawn-out scene with Mrs Tallis lying on her bed, with a migraine. She is entirely helpless, yet the description of her thoughts indicates that she has the strong belief she is holding everything together. And likewise, Cecilia believes she is the one controlling the messiness of others. "The success of the evening would rest in her hands," thinks Cecilia (102). There are suggestions that the real order in the disorder is Mr Tallis, in whose calming presence everything runs as it should. And during the evening it is Leon who is responsible for carrying the conversation and ensuring everyone's happiness. Here is a family in which everyone is 'in control' and believing they are coping with the 'otherness' around them and yet the run of events culminates in absolute chaos.

It is this chaos, Ruff suggests, that postmodernism 'delights' in. It is an awkward adolescence, as awkward as the positions Briony, Lola and Cecilia find

themselves in. McEwan describes all these things – an awareness of our (and others') strangeness, a defiance of absolutes, the willingness to experiment, a delight in cacophony, an emotional vulnerability, the awkwardness in the established ways of the world, a confrontation with a multiplicity of ruptures, a frank and confusing encounter with desire.

What are implications of an adolescent self? This is the question McEwan himself brings to the fore at the end of the novel. Briony asks the question, repeated regularly in this thesis, "How can a novelist achieve atonement when, with her absolute power of deciding outcomes, she is also God?" (371). Perhaps the comparison is a weak one, as mentioned before; but if the postmodern self is in its adolescence, or otherwise described, dissolved, what are the implications in terms of responsibility and accountability? It seems to suggest that what really happened doesn't matter. The boundaries between the real and the created, between one self and multiple selves, are permeated. As mentioned in the previous chapter, what really happened does matter in terms of marginalised groups who are hard at work to reconstruct history and identities. In terms of issues as enormous and important as race, gender, sexuality and the like, reconstructing a sense of self is paramount. What will be argued at a later stage is the importance of a responsible relationship with others that demands we take into account their 'otherness'.

Albeit a weak metaphor, the idea of adolescence does point towards the need to move on from this position. We may describe the extreme postmodern position, tentatively, as that of a rebellious teenager reacting against inhibiting and destructive essentialist theories. But an adolescent self implies a self that is still to grow up. It suggests a self that is between things, between the old and the new. It suggests a self in transition, a self that has not arrived yet. Postmodernism is right to kick against an autonomous god-like self. But to replace it with an entirely dissolved self that is 'too thin' to bear responsibility, would be as great an error. Thus a more nuanced understanding of the postmodern self and an exploration of the Christian sense of self is in order.

4.3. Naming

Naming is often associated with owning. This can clearly be seen in the novels, as will be expounded upon shortly. But naming is more than this; or has the potential to be more than this. Naming doesn't need to be final. The associations we create around the area of naming are dynamic. We can be renamed; we can take *re*-ownership of our own names. A community that loves us can give new meaning to our names.

What Levinas stresses is a self in relation. Not an autonomous or dualistic self, with mind and rationality at the top and the soul as immortal; but rather a complete self, a whole self - mind, body and spirit - finding its identity or humanity

in relation; in relation to God, theologically speaking, and in relation to the other, in postmodern terms. Thus a heteronomous self, a view of the self as one that sits comfortably with postmodern and Christian thinkers. It is a powerful way to view the self that transcends the limiting grip of essentialist philosophies. The following section will examine naming. It will show how naming can be an act of violence, as Derrida suggests, and how naming can be a liberating way to view and experience the self, when it occurs in terms of community. Naming is being used, because it plays a significant role in several of the novels under question; markedly *Beloved* and *Oranges*. But even in the other two novels, the idea of representation and the self in relation to others comes into play repeatedly.

"'I know your name.' She stopped, afraid. If this were true she would be trapped. Naming meant power. Adam had named the animals and the animals came at his call" (*Oranges*, 138). So writes Winterson in the chapter headed 'Ruth', describing how trapped Jeanette feels in her identity in the church community. And yet the rest of the novel describes her quest to re-name herself, and to reidentify herself in a new way. The conclusions of this renaming process remain unclear in this novel. It is as if Jeanette cannot escape the destructive power of her name, given by her mother, symbolizing the identity her mother prescribed for her at birth. "My mother...dreamed a dream...She would get a child, train it, build it, dedicate it to the Lord: a missionary child, a servant of God, a blessing" (10). Although Jeanette fails to fulfill this vision of her mother's, there is nevertheless no sense that she has been able recreate something new; she has

no new community within which to rename herself. The situation is quite different in Morrison's *Beloved.*

"I am beloved and she is mine," says Sethe of Beloved, says Beloved of Sethe, says Denver of Beloved (214). I am. It seems to be stressed, so many times in this harrowing novel, that the characters described have no power to name themselves; they are named. And not only are their names prescribed, but their roles and identities as well. Naming, here, seems predictive, deterministic. At the very start of the novel it is described how the Sweet Home owner, Mr Garner, names his slaves on the farm as a sign of ownership. "Paul D Garner, Paul F Garner, Paul A Garner..." (11) Garner insists to the other slave owners that if you're "a man yourself, you'll want your niggers to be men" (10). But it is clear from their names already that these 'men' are no more to him than his property.

Each of these men from Sweet Home struggles to make sense of his identities apart from slavery. Sixo goes as far as choosing death rather than be the property of another man. Paul D expresses his confusion around his identity as follows, "When he looks at himself through Garner's eyes he sees one thing. Through Sixo's eyes another. One makes him feel righteous. One makes him feel ashamed" (169). Interestingly, it is at this moment that Paul D enters 124 and begins to take ownership of that space. He makes the choice to enter a space where he knows and is known by others in order to be able to reclaim his selfhood.

In a detailed analysis of *Beloved*, literary theorist Ledbetter (1993, 81) examines the area of ownership in terms of the body. He describes the implications of a body that is first disfigured, then violated, and then dismembered, and how it is possible to turn these into something new and full of hope. He begins by referring to the moment when Sethe's mother shows her the marking (we presume a slave branding – a sign of ownership) below her breast. But she turns this sign of ownership into a sign of recognition, of a new kind of ownership related to belonging, to family. "If anything happens to me and you can't tell me by my face, you can know me by this mark," she says to Sethe (61). Sethe's own body is disfigured when her back is opened by a whip. The tree that grows on her back is a sign of ownership, of being powerless. And yet it is turned into a sign of a new kind of ownership when Paul D re-owns it, when he touches every 'ridge and leaf of it with his mouth' (18). The disfigured body, disfigured as a sign of ownership, can be reinvented as a sign of belonging. Ledbetter stresses that this reinvention is only possible in the complete recognition of the pain, the suffering and the enormity of the disfiguration.

Similarly, in the Clearing, Baby Suggs insists the freed slaves take a new ownership over their violated bodies. "Yonder they do not love our flesh. They despise it...No more do they love the skin on your back. Yonder they flay it. And O my people they do not love your hands. Those they only tie, bind, chop off, and leave empty. Love your hands! Love them. You got to love it, you!" (88). The

body violated needs to be actively re-owned, and this occurs, more often than not, in the context of a community, of relationship.

The need to take ownership of one's name and power of naming is enormous, as can be seen in *Beloved*, where Sethe allows herself to be violated in order to 'buy' the right to name what is hers. Ten minutes of violation by the grave attendant allows for seven letters to be chiselled on the headstone of her daughter's grave. Ledbetter (1993, 87) describes discomfort with the idea that it seems Sethe enjoys the violation. And yet it is the violation that gives rise to naming, to ownership over something that is rightfully hers. In an ironic way, the act of being powerless gives her power.

The body dismembered is described as the most appalling and frightening, by Ledbetter (1993, 88); and worst is the moment when Sethe beheads her own daughter in a desperate attempt to own her. It is her love for her daughter, a love as 'strong as death', and her need to own that which is hers, that leads her to take her own daughter's life. "This is how Sethe remembers the impulse to kill her own children," writes Lorna Sage, "'Collected every bit of life she had made, all the parts of her that were precious and fine and beautiful' and took them to a place where no one could hurt them" (1992, 182). It is the gathering of all the parts of her, and refusing to allow them to be owned by anyone else, that is significant here. They are hers and she owns them.

And yet her act of ownership fails, as does Baby Suggs'. Baby Suggs, while lying on her death bed, says she has proved herself a liar (89). "Those white things have taken all I had or dreamed of" (89). They are defeated in their attempts at re-owning themselves. This is not, however, a final defeat. Later in the novel, it is shown how reownership can occur, but only under certain circumstances, such as healing or redemption, and an acknowledgement of the 'otherness' in one self and others.

The following quote from *Oranges* depicts the longing that was referred to in the opening chapter; the longing to be named within the context of relationship. "There are many forms of love," writes Winterson (165). "Some people can spend their whole lives together without knowing each other's names. Naming is a difficult and time-consuming process; it concerns essences and it means power. But on the wild nights, who can call you home? Only the one who knows your name." In the following section it will be examined what it means to have someone else 'know your name' and to be 'called home', and why this is so important.

At this point we can see that we're not imagining naming in terms of essentialism – that there is an essential 'you' that exists over time, that is autonomous and so on. But nor are we speaking of naming as an act of violence, or a self that is entirely fragmented. By allowing for a dialogue between postmodern thought and Christianity, we can begin to see naming as a product of a community, as part of

a process of forming identity and reforming identity, constructing and reconstructing the self. Naming implies ownership but the kind of ownership that comes from life experience, from, as Morrison describes, 'life lived'.

4.4. Community and covenant

We ask again the question, what does it mean to be human? Many philosophers, from Plato to Augustine have stressed humankind's rational self, emphasizing that to have the ability to reason is what makes us human. But other philosophers, such as Aristotle, have pointed to the fact that "the genuinely human is relational" (Thiselton, 1997). Theologian Anthony Thiselton begins to unpack the Biblical idea that we are made 'in the image of God'. Theologians through the ages have found this to mean that we are thinking, rational beings. But Thisleton argues that when the apostle Paul describes us as being 'made in the image of God' in the New Testament he is referring to something much more than that. Thisleton argues that Paul draws a parallel between being made in the image of God and being in relationship (1997, 76). "Being created in the image of God means that humans find this true identity in co-existence with each other and with all other creatures" (1997, 77). This kind of terminology resounds deafeningly with that of postmodern philosophers such as Levinas and writers such as Morrison and Winterson. This yearning to find one's identity within the context of community is a powerful theme that runs through all the novels under study.

In the following section the argument that humans are not autonomous but rather heteronomous, will be put forth. In a series of lectures about the philosophies of Levinas, theorist Anthony Beavers (1996, 2) describes Levinas' interest in the idea of covenant. The idea of covenant is one that runs throughout the Christian Bible, starting with the covenant made between Noah, and later, the great patriarch Abraham, and God. But Beavers (1996, 4) describes how it is not only a Biblical concept but also a cultural concept. He argues that the difference between the early Greek state and the early Jewish state was that the Greek state focused on individualism and autonomy, but the inhabitants of the Jewish state were more concerned with covenant – both with their God and with each other. Levinas writes, "Within the Covenant each person finds himself responsible for everyone else; each act of the covenant expresses more than six hundred thousand personal act of responsibility" (Beavers, 1996, 2).

The idea of covenant holds with it the idea of being responsible to another person; not to be dependent or independent, but to be interdependent. It links very powerfully with the Nguni concept of ubuntu – 'I am because you are'. And it is a concept that resounds powerfully with the novels. In *Knowledge* there is a continuous struggle for Amara to belong and yet to be set free. The community is very unsettled by both her and Palinor's otherness, and Severo and Beneditx are forced to question what it is that defines their community – whether it is the fundamental truths of a particular religious system, or the relationships of love, in

the most unclichéd sense. In *Atonement* we find Briony trying to make sense of her participation in a community that exists beyond her own mind. In *Beloved* we have the harrowing depiction of slaves seeking the reconstruction of a sense of selfhood in community. And in *Oranges*, Jeanette is torn between a need to express herself independently of her community, and yet needing desperately to belong within a community. In an interesting study of youth in one of Cape Town's poorest and most violent communities, Mamphela Ramphele analyses what factors contribute to certain young people succeeding where others become victims to gangsterism, hopelessness, and failure. She finds that those that are successful have somehow managed to find a balance between needing to express one's selfhood and yet finding that selfhood within the context of a community. She writes, "The greatest contradiction of being human lies in our individuality having to find expression in the context of being part of the collective. Too much individualism leaves you overly focused on the self and denies you the enrichment that comes from relationships with others. Too much immersion in the group constrains the emergence of the unique talents and creative energies in individuals essential for the enhancement of everyone." (2002, 102).

To back track for a moment, let's consider in greater depth this longing that the characters in the novel seem to be expressing. Both Winterson and Morrison refer to a sections from the Bible to describe the powerful interrelationships of their characters. The verse in the Bible reads, "Seal me in your heart...for love is

as strong as death and jealousy as cruel as the grave. Many waters cannot quench the flame of love; neither can the floods drown it. If any man tried to buy it with everything he owned, he could not do it" (*Song of Solomon* 8:6). We are speaking here of a connection between people that implies that they are almost bound together beyond all rational understanding. It is this kind of 'bondage' in relationship that both Sethe in *Beloved* and Jeanette in *Oranges* seem to be seeking, and yet there is always the danger that this powerful way of relating might become distorted.

In *Oranges*, Jeanette describes the powerful longing for relationship as follows: "The unknownness of my needs frighten me. I do not know how huge they are...I only know that they are not being met" (165). Such enormous needs, such unmet longing for love are paramount in Jeanette and other characters in the novels, who are seeking for some sort of rest as they grapple with their identities. As they seek to have their needs met, they come face to face with the destructive love of others and the destructive love within themselves.

The enormity of their needs grows disproportionately, however, because they are hurt by those who should be loving them. Jeanette speaks again and again of being betrayed. "By betrayal I mean promising to be on your side, then being on somebody else's" (166). The church community she grows to trust, and the mother she follows unquestioningly, all turn out to be a 'sham'; the word Winterson herself uses in the preface to the novel. Even Jeanette's lover,

Melanie, turns against her, insisting that there was never anything between them. When her affair with Katy is discovered, it costs Jeanette's battered loyalties little to set up a situation where Katy betrays her too. The bitterness at these betrayals goes deep: deep enough to develop within her a hunger for a relationship that is 'true'. "I want someone who is fierce and will love me until death," says Jeanette. "And know that love is as strong as death...I want someone who will destroy and be destroyed by me" (165). The allusion to the passage in *Song of Solomon* is not incidental. Jeanette yearns for the all-consuming love as described of King Solomon and his lover.

To 'destroy and be destroyed by love' is the sentiment of Sethe in *Beloved* as well. Broken by the horrors of slave life, the sick acts of violation, the dignity and rights that have been taken from her, Sethe's love is now a greedy one, a possessive one, ready to destroy. "This here Sethe talked about love like any other woman," says Paul D. "But what she meant could cleave a bone. This here Sethe talked about safety with a handsaw" (164). When Sethe speaks of destroying and being destroyed she means taking the life of her own child due to her fierce, possessive love. She means allowing herself to be violated in order to win the right to name that child. And this hungry love lives not only in Sethe, but in Beloved too. When Beloved returns to her in the form of a ghost, it is as a child starved of love, and filled with a strong sense of abandonment and betrayal. What she doesn't realise is that "her protector has been denied the right to love

and protect by dominant historical forces" over which Sethe had no control (Ochoa, 1999).

The love between the 'love-hungry' Denver, Sethe and Beloved pushes all others away from them. They desire to saturate and be saturated by one another. And yet the love they share is a jealous love, 'jealous as the grave'. "They ate like men, ravenous and intent" (183), eating not only food, but of each other and each other's love, ravenously. When we come to the passage – those fragmented bits of texts – where each says of the other, "I am beloved and she is mine," the jealous, possessive love comes to its culmination. Boundaries begin to disappear completely as each of the three begin to merge into one desperate identity of needy love. "I am not separate from her there is no place where I stop" (210). And at the end of this disturbing piece we read, "You are mine. You are mine. You are mine" (217). We can here imagine love as strong as death and jealousy as cruel as the grave. Says Ochoa (1999, 6):

> Solomon's beloved says, "I am my beloved's and my beloved is mine" (6:3). In direct contrast, Morrison's main character says, "I AM BELOVED and she is mine". Whereas the feeling of being beloved is mutual in the Biblical account, Beloved's love for her mother is jealously one-sided since the daughter claims more love than Sethe, or any slave mother, is capable of giving. That Beloved has a claim upon her mother which paradoxically must be but cannot be satisfied is arguably the most forceful point of the novel (214).

But the love of covenant, the relationship of interdependence was never intended to be one that would destroy or overcome the other. Reformed theologian, Wielenga (2002), discusses the significance of the Biblical notion of covenant with regards to Reformed doctrine and missions. He stresses the point that within the Reformed tradition, covenant implies a formalized, asymmetrical, mutual relationship between God and this world. A covenant relationship must be mutual, or it is neither relational nor covenantal. In Christian terms this relationship is always initiated and maintained by God. Wielenga argues that this covenant is not merely a metaphor, but rather an historical event "that can be traced back to the beginnings of humankind on earth". This covenant between God and his world is one that is purposeful, and is leading towards, in Biblical terms, the completion of a salvation plan. Initiated by God, out of love, and responded to by humankind due to the responsibility placed on humankind since the Fall, this covenant is one of responsible mutuality (2002, 7).

In a similar vein to this reading into covenant, Levinas argues that every human being is in a covenant relationship – a responsible relationship of mutuality – with every other human being. And this Biblical concept is enormously important when considering otherness and redemption in terms of the novels under study. The problem, for example, in *Beloved*, is that the relationship between Sethe and her two daughters is not one of responsible mutuality. It should, arguably, be asymmetrical, as Sethe has greater responsibility to her children than they have to her. But as Ochoa points out, Sethe has been bereft of the ability to play the

part in the 'covenant contract' that she should and wants to play. 'Dominant historical forces' have rendered her helpless, and her acts of violation and dismembering, as Ledbetter would describe it, are attempts by Sethe to stay true to her covenantal responsibility. In *Oranges*, Jeanette is clearly longing for the 'responsible mutuality' implied in a covenant relationship. And McEwan, in *Atonement*, cleverly unravels the idea of responsibility in relationship, the responsibility we have to 'other minds', as has been discussed in some detail previously.

Before we begin to explore the role of covenant in otherness, we need to unpack some of Levinas' thoughts around the idea of knowledge and 'knowability'. Levinas says, "Knowledge has always been interpreted as assimilation. Even the most surprising discoveries end by being absorbed, comprehended" (In Beavers, 1996, 13). When confronted with otherness, it is not unusual to attempt to make that which is other a part of the self. "Knowing is thus a reduction of the foreign to the familiar, of what is other to the self," says Beavers (1996, 14). And this is exactly what Briony does. She takes what she observes to be inexplicable, complicated, a part of the chaotic adult world, and she reduces it to what is understandable, 'miniature' in her own world. She reduces the messiness of other minds, of the world out there, into something neat and organized in her own world. McEwan places great emphasis on the fact that Briony's world is neat, organized and miniature, and that the 'world out there' is messy, complicated and chaotic. That 'otherness' is a messy and complicated thing, and there is the

temptation to reduce that to 'sameness', to that which is familiar to our own minds; "of that which is other to the self" (Beavers, 1996, 14).

And yet Levinas argues strongly against the idea that "the Same dominates or absorbs or includes the other, and whose model is knowledge" (Beavers, 1996, 14). He says that we have the metaphysical desire for 'the otherness of the other'. And he further argues that this desire can never be satisfied. Here follows a description of this desire in Beavers' words:

> If the otherness of the other is desired, then something must first present this otherness to consciousness. Levinas localizes the appearance of this otherness in face-to-face situations. 'The face of the Other resists my power to assimilate the Other into knowledge; it resist possession, which would have the net result of silencing the voice of the Other as Other. Thus the face of the other silently wages the command, "Thous shalt not kill". This means that the face to face situation has an ethical dimension to it' (1996, 14).

It is this face-to-face confrontation which Briony struggles with throughout *Atonement*. It is the realization that she has assimilated the Other – Cecilia, Robbie, and their stories – into herself at the expense of the Other that she seeks atonement for. She has 'killed' the Otherness of Cecilia and Robbie, using Levinasian terminology. And they are no longer present to demand to be taken into account. Briony speaks of only being able to publish her novel when all the people involved who could question its validity, are dead. As long as they are

present, face-to-face, to silently wage the command not to kill, Briony cannot move forward in her attempt to assimilate the Other into herself. But when the face-to-face demands are taken away, she can commit murder without the ethical consequences. Or can she? McEwan suggests that the role of author as God is a frightening one, and the consequences are destructive. They are destructive, not only because individuals who are dead and know nothing of the writing are misrepresented, but because the very concept of a responsible covenant relationship with alterity is compromised. McEwan has Briony consciously, at the temple, putting to death 'the messiness of other minds' (74). It is enormously significant that this happens at the temple, which is described to be a fake that is falling apart. McEwan is perhaps suggesting that the very act of writing may in fact be a step towards this kind of irresponsibility; a 'sin' that somehow eludes atonement.

To return to our longing; it was mentioned before that characters such as Sethe and her two daughters, and Jeanette, are longing to be 'known by their names' and 'called home', to be loved with a love as 'strong as death'. Levinas suggests that the tension between the Greek and Jewish states includes a tension between the responsibility to civil state and the responsibility to 'home'. He argues that whereas traditionally, Greeks defined themselves according to their roles in society, Jews would define themselves along the lines of 'home'. "Here (in the Jewish world) the direction is not away from the home (to the office, to the civil society). Instead it seeks to return home, to its own locality, to the holy land."

(Beavers, 1996, 12). This is an important shift in thinking. One could compare the Greek paradigm with that of the thinking during the Enlightenment – emphasizing the space of civil society over and above home space. And one could argue that postmodern thought is moving away from this prioritizing of space, of defining the self in terms of civil society. However, the postmodern paradigm hasn't necessarily adopted the Jewish 'home' paradigm. This is where the problem lies. Levinas argues for the importance of identification with a community, within responsible relationships, within the context of the 'home' concept, for the purpose of coming to terms with otherness.

Levinas says that is from within the context of 'home' that the Other, the stranger, can be met and welcomed (Beavers, 1996, 15). In the Christian tradition, we read in the Bible of how we are encouraged to welcome the stranger into our homes, and give them food and drink. It is within the 'domain of interiority' that such an act can take place, says Beavers (1996, 15). It is within the domain of 'concrete existence, away from all the abstractions of social life' that individuals can 'emerge as people with stories to tell' (Beavers, 1996, 15). With lives lived. The home is the domain of the interpersonal. It is within this domain that we can come to terms with alterity and responsibility to the other can unfold.

Levinas goes on to say that "the Other comes from 'on high' out of nowhere, he intrudes upon the rational order and interrupts my project of possessing the world" (in Beavers, 1996, 13). Here Briony comes to mind, who will not allow

otherness to interrupt her 'project of possessing the world'. In fact, she insists that her writing of the events will be the one important to readers. And yet, by the very fact that she finds no 'atonement' in this act we can conclude that she has not been completely successful in stilling the voice of the other. Levinas puts before us this incredible challenge: "If one wishes to encounter the Other outside the institutional order, that is, outside of knowledge, this can only be done by looking the Other in the face, by casting one's gaze on the incommensurable and accepting the responsibility this entails. This, indeed is a difficult task" (in Beavers, 1996, 16). It is much simpler to assimilate the other into ourselves, to turn otherness into sameness. And yet, for the purposes of identity and selfhood, it is paramount to take on the responsibility of the face of the other. Paul D does this so powerfully at the end of *Beloved*. He has struggled with the otherness he finds in Sethe, and even in himself. And without needing to assimilate all this into sameness, he comes to terms with it, and takes on the responsibility otherness implies. Through this act, an enormous path is opened towards the potential redemption of Paul D and Sethe in both their slave community, and the community at large.

Chapter 5

Conclusion

"With postmodernism, God emerges from the white-out nihilism of modern atheism and from behind the patriarchal masks imposed by modernity's secular theology. The emergence of the postmodern has fostered post-secular thinking – thinking about other, alternative worlds. In the postmodern cultural climate, the theological voice can once more be heard", writes postmodern theologian Graham Ward (1998, xxiii). And that is the starting point of my argument: that postmodern thought has opened a space where the dialogue between Christianity and contemporary culture can reemerge. Further, postmodern thought has brought into contemporary thinking ideas and ways of thinking that have resonance with the Christian paradigm. Such ideas include a less homogeneous, more people-orientated understanding of space; a less causal, more relational model of time; a less autonomous, more community orientated understanding of the self.

Levinas writes, "With the appearance of the human - and this is my entire philosophy – there is something more important than my life, and that is the life of the other" (in Beavers, 1996, 16). It is this focus on the other that has brought to the fore a common thread between the Christian faith and postmodern thought. Nowhere else in human history has such importance been placed on hearing other voices, taking into consideration multiple ways of seeing, learning to be

tolerant in the face of difference and otherness. However, as I've attempted to argue at various points during this thesis, it is my strong belief that postmodern thought has failed to successfully carry through many of its ideas to a useful conclusion for the everyday person on the street. It is for this reason that I believe that through dialogue between the Christian faith and postmodern thought, it will be possible to come up with a paradigm that can successfully fulfill the mandate of living for the other.

Perhaps my use of various terms throughout this thesis has been a little loose and confusing. But in my mind, homecoming, redemption and meeting with the other are all one and the same thing. They all point towards the creation of an environment that privileges 'people space' over homogenous space, histories punctuated by relationships over History with a causal timeline, and community over autonomy, when imagining the self.

Here we have a meeting point between what might first have seemed binary opposites: In terms of alterity, Christian theology and postmodern thought have the same desire at heart. Not only this, these two paradigms need each other to realize this desire. Christian theology, left in the realm of traditional values and enlightenment philosophies has been in danger of becoming redundant, and even worse, destructive in its legalistic approach towards such issues as gender, race, other faiths, and any 'other' that doesn't fit comfortably in the Church

system. Postmodern thought, left in the realm of deconstruction, has been in the danger of losing its focus on having real impact on real people in the real world.

Following this line of thought, black-American theorist bell hooks, in *Yearning: Race, Gender, and Cultural Politics* argues that postmodern discourse has become the discourse of the academic elite (1991, 23). She argues that although postmodern theory claims to be concerned with difference and otherness, it has remained in the academic sphere rather than becoming a reality in praxis. In fact, says hooks, postmodern discourse is strangely missing black theorists and even black topics. "The focus on 'Otherness and difference' that is often alluded to in these [postmodern] works seems to have very little concrete impact as an analysis or standpoint that might change the nature and direction of postmodern theory" (1991, 24). Perhaps it is for this reason that Morrison has chosen to distance her novels from postmodern theory. Postmodernism has done enormously important work, argues hooks, in opening up a space for considering difference and otherness as 'legitimate issues in the academy' but it has little relevance where it really matters. "Radical postmodern practice," says hooks, "should incorporate the voices of displaced, marginalised, exploited and oppressed black people" (1991, 24).

hooks is thus not against postmodern theory. Rather, she questions the impact it has had in terms of otherness. She writes, "Radical postmodernism calls attention to those shared sensibilities which cross the boundaries of class,

gender, race etc., that could be fertile ground for the construction of shared empathies – ties that would promote recognition of common commitments and serve as a basis for solidarity and coalition" (1991, 24). This is the potential she sees postmodern thought as having. "The overall impact of postmodernism is that many groups now share with black folks a sense of deep alienation, despair, loss of a sense of grounding even if it is not informed by shared circumstances" (1991, 24). However, these 'shared empathies' in theory do not seem to be panning out in reality, as we will see Kawash also arguing later in this chapter.

'Yearning' is the word hooks uses to describe what she calls 'the common psychological state shared by many of us'. This word, yearning, brings us back to the beginning of my thesis, where I quoted from popular singer, Avril Lavigne and described our current state of being as one of 'longing'. There is a yearning, or a longing, to be heard, to be loved, to belong. It is this validation of relative alternative states, as hooks mentions, that postmodernism has brought to our attention (hooks, 1991, 24). But what will it do with this?

Apart from the fact that postmodern theory has remained theory, as hooks mentioned earlier, with little impact on the marginalised, we could take this critique one step further (hooks, 1991, 24). We could argue that postmodern thought has made the mistake of opting for something that is perhaps too democratic. It seeks to equalize all people, arguing for many voices, multiple histories, spaces for everyone to be. Gerald West, who is currently the head of

the Theology department at the University of KwaZulu Natal, says that what Christianity does that postmodernism does not do, is privilege the other, the marginalised, over and above those in power. It is this issue of power and the possibility of creating a home environment for meeting the other in praxis that will be the focus of this final chapter.

After I have summed up the thesis so far, I will consider Kawash's ideas around *hybridity* and how they apply to the other as displayed in the novels. Next, I will spend some time discussing *humanity:* what it really means to prefer the other over the self. Lastly, I will explore the idea of *home,* examining postmodern homelessness as described by theologian Steven Bouma-Prediger and the potential for homecoming through the dialogue between postmodern thought and the Christian faith.

5.1. A Retrospection

The chapter on Space brought to our attention three things: firstly, that postmodern thought has potentially opened up a new space for 'play', for transforming destructive and limiting paradigms into something new, for reimagining the old. But, secondly, that postmodern thought hasn't decided what this 'new' will be and in the meantime is in danger of neglecting the important issue of responsibility to the Other because that it has the danger of not being

grounded in 'people space'. And, finally, that together, Christianity and postmodern thought can challenge each other to be people-grounded.

In the chapter on Time, it was shown how the negotiated perspective between postmodern thought and Christianity did not see time as a series of causal events on a linear time-line, but rather, it sees time as a series of relational encounters between people and their God (from a theological angle), or perhaps closer to what Morrison described as 'life lived'. What makes the past significant in the present with consequences for the future are human relationships. And this is a conclusion we can come to through dialogue, or negotiation, between the postmodern and theological perspectives.

This led directly into discussing the postmodern subject and theological alternatives. In the chapter on Identity, I argued that perhaps the postmodern theorists are correct in suggesting that the existence of an essential self, divorced from any kind of context, with a kernel of absolute 'selfness' is unlikely. And yet the extreme opposite idea, that then there is no self at all, no kernel of continuity in time and space, is also quite inaccurate. Instead, we can say that a self has existence, or selfhood, in the context of relationship and community. These relationships are based on the responsibilities that exist between the self and the other, and these relationships are grounded in time and space. They are based on the fact that every person has a longing that can roughly be described as a need to be redeemed – accepted, forgiven, called home; however you

choose to articulate it. But that this longing is interrupted by the difficulties of alterity; that we are constantly confronted with otherness, and we don't know what to do with it. What is needed, in order to develop a sense of selfhood in community so that redemption can take place, is an understanding of how to negotiate otherness.

This chapter will remind the reader of how the selected novels have pointed us in various directions as we have explored them, and allowed them to speak. But ultimately, they have all pointed in a very similar direction that calls for these ways of thinking about time, space and the subject.

5.2. Hybridity

In the previous chapter we spoke of essentialism and the subject. I argued that essentialism was destructive and that the postmodern alternative, of a more dissolved subject, was a reaction against essentialism. Samira Kawash argues that although there is no 'essential' black American or essential white American we cannot say that the colour line has been deconstructed. Kawash says it is dangerous to assume that such terms as 'hybridity' and theories around interdependence (as I was arguing for in the previous chapter) are really manifesting themselves in every day life. She argues that although we bandy about such terms as 'borderland identities' that have moved beyond race, culture and gender, in actual experience, essentialist paradigms are still very much alive. This links with what I was saying earlier, that in reality, the other is still

marginalised, however much postmodern theory speaks of multiple voices that need to be heard.

Kawash makes clear that the whole area of essentialism is a lot more complex than what I described it to be. On the one hand, she argues, there 'can be no essential blackness', no 'essence' that unites all black people and makes them black. "But, on the other hand, blackness is always determined as an essence insofar as its very existence is dependent on being essentially different from whiteness" (1997, 19). This is starkly evident in *Beloved,* where the reader is made aware of the enormous gap between the experiences of the black slaves and the experiences of the few white characters in the novel. When Sethe is escaping Sweet Home farm, near death, she is discovered by a white girl called Amy Denver. Amy rubs her feet back to life and restores Sethe's strength to continue with her journey to 124. Amy chatters away while she tries to relieve Sethe of her pain, and as she talks the enormous chasm between her experiences and Sethe's become apparent. "I had me some whippings, but I don't remember anything like this," she says while examining Sethe's scarred back (79). Later she says, "We got an old nigger girl come by our place. She don't know nothing ... just like you. You don't know a thing" (80). The difference between what Sethe knows and what Amy knows is somehow tied up with their histories, their experiences, their memories, their race. When Baby Suggs leads the freed slaves in the spiritual gathering in the Clearing she insists that they 'love their flesh'. "Yonder they don't love your flesh, they despise it," she says.

Healing of the freed slaves happens within the community, where there is a shared memory, a shared understanding of what it means to be black.

Anti-essentialist theories, argues Kawash, argue that we will move 'beyond race' or 'beyond racism'. "This narrative of the beyond – beyond identity, beyond race, beyond racism – is in many ways a revision of the Enlightenment narrative of the universal subject which gradually sheds all particularity and contingency to emerge into the light of its true being, with the signal difference that this being has been recast as essentially hybrid rather than essentially singular" (Kawash, 1996, 20). But Kawash insists that a term such a 'hybridity' holds more than merely anti-essentialist rhetoric. She argues that hybridity is a challenge "not only to the question of human 'being', but to the status of knowledge itself, the question of how and if we can know identity or hybridity" (1996, 20).

Beloved and *Atonement* place emphasis on the idea of memory. Again and again Morrison emphasizes the importance of *re*membering; of collectively reliving the past in order to achieve healing in the present. The identity of Sethe, Denver, Beloved and Paul D revolved around their memories, and their shared knowledge. Relating interviews with Morrison, Davis stresses how important Morrison finds the knowledge of black American history (2002, 5). Morrison beseeches black Americans to know the three hundred years of their history which has resulted in a particular black identity.

Kawash says, "So long as we continue to think in terms of the beyond, to see race as a category mistake and racism as an unfortunate lapse, we fail to recognize the constitutive power of the knowledges that produce and perpetuate racism... We may know that race is a fiction (that there is nothing in the world that can do all we ask 'race' to do for us), just as we know that the autonomous subject cannot exist (that what we call the subject is not a point of essential coherence but is rather a nexus of complex, shifting and fully contingent articulations)..." (1996, 20). This knowledge doesn't take us to somewhere new, argues Kawash, because we are always limited by the concepts, by the terms, by defining ourselves by what we are not, or what we must move beyond; as Derrida would say, we are still controlled by the terms, even if they are 'under erasure' (1996, 21).

Thus Kawash describes an 'under erasure' definition of hybridity, her description sounding much like how Levinas would describe encounters with the other. First, she describes hybridity as 'unknowable and unrespresentable', much as Levinas describes the other. She says, 'Hybridity in its most complex sense is an impossibility; it is not something that one can be. Rather, it appears at the limit, the rupture, the constitutive outside identity'. Again, these are all ways Levinas would describe meeting with the other. Kawash continues: "Hybridity is the difference that interrupts the relation of the same and different, a different different that does not relate to the order of the same" (1996, 22). The novels point to this kind of 'hybrid' encounter with the other. In *Knowledge of Angels* we

have the encounter between the village men and Amara, the wolf child. This develops into the 'impossible' relationship that develops between Jaime and Amara and later Josefa and Amara. It makes no sense that such a relationship should be able to exist, it is an 'impossibility'. It 'interrupts the relation of the same and different'. The relationship between Palinor and Beneditx is again an example of this. They cannot relate to one another on a level of 'sameness' but what does draw these different characters together are such things as compassion and love, as will be discussed a little later.

Kawash argues that the only way we can experience this hybrid encounter with the other is not by moving beyond the terms ('beyond race', for example) but by 'plunging' into the boundaries that stand between one race and another, one gender and another, one person and another (1996, 23). As was mentioned with reference to Derrida in the chapter on space, it is in the 'playing' with boundaries that new ideas and new ways of being can emerge (in Royle, 2003, 30).

5.3 Humanity

In *A Change of Tongue*, South African journalist Antjie Krog speaks about former South African president Nelson Mandela's oddity in reciting stories that are word-for-word identical to what he has written in his book. Is it old age? Is it forgetfulness? "It has nothing to do with old age. It is very deliberate. Mandela is doing it intentionally to undermine what he calls the whole postmodernist notion

of ever-changing texts or something. As if Mandela wants to say that there are certain truths which should always exist as truths, and that these important truths should exist in precisely the same way if people want to find one another" (Krog, 2003, 223).

And one of these truths is that of humanity. Krog writes that humanity seems such a cliched word, but Mandela keeps using it. "Maybe that's another reason why Mandela insists on relating particular stories in exactly the same way. In the stubbornly unalterable framework he creates, he opens up safe spaces in which words like 'humanity, 'human dignity' can be resuscitated. Get breath, as it were, and some colour in their cheeks..." (2003, 257). Although Mandela might believe he is undermining 'the whole postmodern notion of ever-changing text' he is in fact doing a very postmodern thing. He is taking an old word, with certain associations and, as Krog says, opening up 'safe spaces' in which such a word can 'get breath'.

What the novels point to is this very idea of 'humanity'. In *Knowledge* the humanity of Amara is constantly under question, and the humanity of a so-called Christian community who burns heretics at the stake. In *Oranges*, the treatment of the 'homosexual other' is under scrutiny, and again the humanity of the Christian community under treatment. *Beloved* is a novel of dehumanized slaves regaining their human dignity. Both postmodern theory and Christianity are concerned with restoring human dignity. Postmodernism seeks to do this

through giving everyone space to be, to have a voice, to have a history that may be different to other voices and histories. Christianity seeks to do this through healing and community. Postmodern thought has the potential of creating new spaces where such Christian ideas as healing, redemption, homecoming and community can 'get breath', get some 'colour in their cheeks'.

Postmodern critique of pre-postmodern times targets the fact that the other was being oppressed and marginalised by a need to make the other 'the same'. The problem, says Levinas, is that the world forever seeks to 'make known the Other' (Beavers, 1996, 14). This is clearly evident in *Oranges*, where Jeanette longs to be part of the community in her own terms, in her own expression of selfness, and yet the community continuously tries to force her into the mould of sameness. Likewise, in *Knowledge*, Paton Walsh describes the extreme consequences of a community that cannot come to terms with alterity. We have the murder of one 'other', Palinor, and the potential murder of another 'other', Amara. "There is no room for the Other in the 'real world'" writes Beavers (1996, 15). Likewise, he writes, "there was no room for Jesus in the Inn. He had to be born in a stable, outside of the social order". This is a powerful comparison as it points to how postmodern theory and Christian theology can dialogue so powerfully. They are both so very concerned with otherness, with the marginalised, with those outside of the 'social order', and the possibility of accepting the concept of self in the context of 'home' for the purpose of redemption is one that is open to both perspectives.

It is when we realize that our being human depends on the other's humanity that this meeting of the other can begin to take place. A 'true' meeting of the other requires an understanding of the Christian ideal of the self. The Christian ideal calls us to 'die to self'; to put to death anything that might rob the other of his humanity. The Christian ideal says such things as to be 'great' one needs to be the servant of all. We can safely meet the other without fear of assimilation if we adopt this ideal self: a self that seeks to serve, to be the slave, even, of the other. The Christian ideal is epitomized in Jesus Christ who took the role of ultimate victim, ultimate sacrifice. Christian writer, Henri Nouwen, talks about the idea of the 'wounded healer' in a book with that title (1990). He writes: "Making our wounds a source of healing ... calls for a constant willingness to see one's own pain and suffering as rising from the depth of the human condition which all men share" (1990, 88). This makes me think of *Beloved,* where Sethe's pain, and Paul D's pain, become a source of healing for each other. In the Clearing with Baby Suggs, it is as if the freed slaves are drawing on the pain that rises from the 'depth of the human condition' and that as they share in this, healing can be found. The 'sameness' lies in our shared humanity. But this shared humanity is one that does not demand assimilation of all that is other or different into the same. Rather, this shared humanity creates the space for otherness and difference.

In *Knowledge of Angels*, we are confronted with a remote island where the self and the self's interaction with and within the community is very prescribed. It is shown through the novel how these prescribed ideas of self are destructive and lead to death. There is also something else going on, though. In the very first chapter, when the village men are confronted with Amara, there is the struggle between the men and within themselves, over whether Amara should be killed. And the elder village men know they would have killed her had it not been for young Jaime's "tender conscience, the smell of his mother's piety still hanging around him" (21). But it is not just 'tender conscience' and 'piety' that describe Jaime's relationship to Amara. The novel is punctuated with moments of deep compassion and a powerful sense of Jaime recognizing Amara's humanity; not only recognizing but experiencing some sort of affinity to it, to her. It is the complicated relationship between Jaime and Amara that is echoed by the relationship between Beneditx and Palinor. There is a sense that what these characters have in common is not their beliefs, customs, traditions or any other 'essentialist' necessities, but rather a sense of compassion and shared humanity.

It may be argued that the entire novel is founded on one significant verse from the Christian Bible: "I may speak in the languages of men, and even of angels, but if I have no love I am no more than a clanging bell or a resounding gong" (1 Corinthians 13). The title, '*Knowledge of Angels*', the continual reference to 'resounding bells' (as mentioned in the chapter on space) and the weighing up of beliefs and systems over and against relationship seem to fit in with this verse.

Benedítx is a clear example of someone realizing that it is not about 'the knowledge of angels' when he begins to love Palinor, in a very powerful way. It is the friendship with this intelligent man that sways him, more than the individual arguments per se. From the start it is clear that Severo is distinctly apart from the religious system of the island, as right from the start he is a man of compassion. The final act of releasing Amara into the snow has the primary significance of an act of love. It can be argued that the novel is ultimately about love in the most unsentimental, uncliched, most authentic kind of way. Over and above the debate between fundamentalism and 'enlightened' thought, I believe this novel is about love, without which the Bible says you are 'no more than a clanging bell or a resounding gong'. When Palinor is lying on his bed the night before his death, he is thinking not necessarily of any religious system, but of the love of his friends, Severo and Bendedítx.

At the end of *The Wounded Healer*, Nouwen talks about how risky being the wounded healer is; how risky it is to be the host who exposes himself and makes himself vulnerable to his guest. This reminds me of Levinas who says that "responsibility emerges from the epiphany of a stranger intruding on the home and calling it into question" (in Beavers, 1996, 5). The whole idea of 'home', of community, of belonging, ties in with the idea of there being a home space which is a safe space where the other can *be*. Meeting the other on the other's terms means exposing to them our *own* otherness, it means taking responsibility for the

other without assimilating them into the self. It means taking the role of servant, of wounded healer.

5.3. Home

In a collection of essays by Christians regarding postmodernism, Steven Bouma-Prediger writes a paper titled 'Yearning for Home'. In this paper he described the postmodern condition as a 'homelessness' (1999, 170). He describes three reasons why he believes this to be the case. Firstly, the skepticism towards truth, and the deconstruction of all that is known and familiar to us, has led to a disorientation and a sense that "our home is a place of pain". Secondly, this sense that home is a place of pain has led to nomadic, rootless selves. We no longer 'have the confidence that we can shape our own destinies'. And thirdly, the degradation and destruction of our planet has led us to believe that our home is spoilt and beyond repair.

This constant sense of homelessness and seeking for home is echoed in all the novels. In *Oranges*, Jeanette is constantly seeking for a community in which she can be safe and no one will 'betray' her (164). In the fantasy story that runs parallel to Jeanette's narrative, Winterson describes Winnet as longing for a utopian world; a place where "truth mattered and no one would betray her" (154). Her desire is to be accepted into a community, to belong, to be loved. She has not abandoned this hope. She is still journeying towards it. When she arrives at the 'ancient city' she says you have to climb a tower, and when you are at the top

of it its impossible to say what is what. "There is no one to discuss it with" (156). There are several things to be considered in this winding text. On the one hand we sense a desire for a utopian city. At another point in the novel, we sense this same thing expressed as a desire to be 'called home' by name, and repeated throughout the novel is the need to belong to those who will love her enough, whom she can understand and be understood by, and talk to. We are talking here of a self that longs to go home.

'What *is* home?' asks Bouma-Prediger. He differentiates between a mere house, a building, a structure, and a home. "A home," he says, "is made of memories and stories and relationships" (1999, 180). In *Beloved* we can see the difference between a house and a home clearly illustrated. 124 is a frightening house, a house with sadness and fear, at the start of the novel. But as the novel progresses and the characters begin to share their stories, their memories, the house becomes a home; a home where Sethe, Denver and Paul D can begin a life together.

Bouma-Prediger goes on to describe 'home' as a place where a person can *be* and let the other *be*. He says, "Home is where we belong, where we find a place, where we gain identity" (1999, 180). He further describes a home as 'bearing the marks of the places' the inhabitants have been. These kinds of descriptions of the concept 'home' are evident in *Beloved.* It is a powerful moment in *Beloved* when Paul D returns to 124 near the end of the novel and finds Sethe lying in

Baby Suggs' 'death bed'. "Don't you die on me!" yells Paul D at Sethe. And the next thing he does is wash her, rub her feet. This moment reminds us of two other times in Sethe's life. Firstly, when she is about to give birth to Denver, and the white girl, Amy, comes and rubs life back into her through her feet. And secondly, when she first arrives in 124, destroyed and broken, and Baby Suggs restores life into her, again, by rubbing her feet. In this novel, the rubbing of Sethe's feet seems to indicate a 'home' idea, a place where Sethe is restored, accepted, looked after, cared for.

As Paul D rubs Sethe's feet at the end of the novel, one gets a powerful sense of people who can be 'home' to each other. Sethe looks at Paul D "and sees it – the blessedness that has made him the kind of man that can walk in a house and make women cry. Because with him, in his presence, they could. Cry and tell him things they only told each other" (272). And Sethe turns to Paul D, and says to him that she misses Beloved. And that 'She was my best thing'. And Paul D, as his mind whirls in love for this woman, thinks, 'I want to put my story next to hers'. Home is the place that 'bears the marks' of all the places Sethe and Paul D have been, that holds all their pain and memory and hope and longing.

Paul D endures the pain of Sethe's past; he endures the jealous love of her children; he endures the rememories, the punishments of slavery, the past that they share. He wrestles with all the enormity of the horror of his, and her, existence. "Tell me," he says to Stamp Paid. "How much is a nigger supposed to

take?" And Stamp replies, "All he can. All he can" (235). If anyone has paid the price, it is Paul D. By giving to Sethe a 'love as strong as death' he "exemplifies the power of love to reclaim the 'beloved who was not beloved', Sethe as an abandoned bride" (Ochoa, 1999, 9). Together they can come home.

The longing for a future redemption, or fulfillment of love, can also be found in *Oranges*. In the context of community, there is always the hint of exclusion, marginalization, betrayal. And the hope of acceptance, love and belonging. The self is not at rest isolated from community. And yet community is not always a place of rest. There are suggestions in *Oranges* that communities are places where one is deluded and hurt, and where so much of the self is threatened and unacceptable. And there are moments in *Beloved* where it is so clear that without the community to restore us, we will find no homecoming. Sixo says of his woman, "The pieces I am, she gathers them together and give them back to me in the right order" (272). Sage (1992) sees Morrison's women as symbolising continuity, the ones who piece-things-together, the ones to come home to. It is Sethe that creates the one point of continuity in Paul D's floating life. And it is the community, in the end, who restore sanity to the lives of Denver and Sethe at Beloved's departure.

Bouma-Prediger beautifully describes the modern condition, the postmodern condition, and the kind of homecoming offered by Christianity:

> If in modernity certain meta-narratives are taken as true and benign, in postmodernity, all meta-narratives are seen as violent even if partially true. Is it possible to acknowledge the danger of grounding stories and yet affirm a non-violent meta-narrative of God's love affair with the cosmos? ... If in modernity we have the individual, rationally superior, inflated self, in postmodernity we find the socially constructed, historically conditioned self. Is it possible to speak cogently of the person-in-relation, gifted and called by God? ... If modernity gives us the endless possession of the other, postmodernity gives us the endless play of the other. Is it possible to envision and enact genuine receptivity and care for the other – to offer healing hospitality to the Stranger? (1999, 183)

The relationship between self and other does not need to be violent or assertive. Within the Christian paradigms of 'dying to self' and 'laying down one's life for the other' there is the possibility of a meeting with the other that involves all the powerful ideas of homecoming described by Bouma-Prediger and longed for in the novels.

At a church service in a Baptist church in Vereeniging a visiting pastor compared the Christian paradigm to the paradigm of 'the world'. The Christian paradigm he described seemed to me to fit the postmodern paradigm as well. The minister said the following:

> "Love is better than knowledge
> Trust is better than courage
> Relationship is better than revelation

The journey is better than the destination."

As simple and unacademic as this may sound, it captures well the kinds of spaces created by postmodern thought and Christianity together, as described by the novel and as argued in this thesis. Throughout this thesis we have been made aware of the dangers of knowledge, as a source of power, or as a way of assimilating the other into the self. We have been made aware of the danger of revelation, as it was manifested by the villagers in *Knowledge* and the church in *Oranges*. We have become wary of 'courage' which implies an autonomous, independent subject, alienated from community, from the idea of being vulnerable. We have seen the destructive potential of 'the destination' in terms of a causal timeline of History. Instead, through the dialogue between postmodern thought and Christianity we have begun to develop a paradigm based on love, trust, relationship and a journey whose destination remains open. It is such a paradigm that unfolds in Morrison's *Beloved*, as Paul D and Sethe, in a relationship of love and trust embark on their journey together. What a novel such as *Beloved* suggests is that we can create new spaces where community can be revived: where healing can take place, where we can meet with the other on the other's terms, where we can come home in.

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