INTRODUCTION

The narrative of *The Ambivalent Skin of Language* is poised at the entry into the "Law of the Father" and exit from the semiotic consisting of body language and non-representational sounds which characterise the mother and child relationship (Kristeva, 1980b). This crossing is marked by an awareness of sexual difference and acquisition of language by the subject. The skin of language which covers over the first relationship is necessarily ambivalent, for although language provides an agency for communication, it is constructed on separation and division.

This threshold, the line over which one must cross in order to exit or enter, is the subject of my textual analysis and visual research, the latter comprising a series of paintings and drawings which scraped, worked and reworked, and hanging unstretched, take on the appearance and quality of 'skins'.

Of course, these two aspects of research are not separate, and have developed side by side during the past year, brushing against each other, merging, re-emerging. The two have become parallel narratives, which are linked thematically, within the structure of this paper.

In Untitled One, using an image of the birth of Aphrodite (figure 1) as a starting point, I examine the appropriation of the mother's body by patriarchy, and the ensuing consequences for women thus positioned
within this order. I draw extensively on the writings of Julia Kristeva, who traces the banishment of the mother from Western culture, to Judaism and the origins of monotheistic religion (1986a).\(^1\) I also refer to her exploration of the psychological and physical aspects of maternity in relation to the cult of the Virgin Mary (1986b).\(^2\)

The image of Aphrodite, used as a pivot for discussion, also led to three drawings, where image and text are combined, to convey some aspects of appropriation and exclusion. In *Cross Word Pieta* (figure 2), Aphrodite becomes a crucified female figure, suggesting the female qualities of Christ and/or his appropriation of a goddess. On this image is superimposed the first verses of St. John's gospel, configured in the shape of a cross and alluding to the exclusion of women from the legislating principle known as the Word. *Copper Coil Pieta* (see figure 5) involves a similar transformation of Aphrodite, but the text, configured as a coil or spiral, alludes to the bodily functions of incorporating and expelling, and to a certain disgust at these functions of corporeality. *Thirty Silver Words* is (figure 3) a triangular configuration of thirty words, quoted from Judge O'Bryan's comments in a rape case last year, where he suggested, in sentencing a rapist, that because the victim was (bashed) unconscious at the time of the rape, she was not as traumatised by the event, and therefore a lesser sentence was "deemed appropriate."\(^3\) This last piece, without an image, but thus named, is a reminder of the thirty pieces of silver paid to Judas to betray Christ. Justice O'Bryan, as representative of the society he serves, is involved in a similar, but complex betrayal.

Untitled Two, and in fact, my subsequent discussion, revolves around the entry of the individual into the symbolic order, the Law of the
Father, which replaces the pre-oedipal relationship with the mother and is marked by the acquisition of language. Kristeva stresses that

"The symbolic order functions in our monotheistic West by means of a system of kinship that involves transmission of the name of the father and a rigorous prohibition of incest, and a system of speech that involves an increasingly logical, simple, positive and 'scientific' form of communication, that is stripped of all stylistic, rhythmic and 'poetic' ambiguities." (1986a:151-her italics)

Kristeva's account originates in Lacan's theory of language⁴, which in turn, originates in Freud's reading of the myth of Oedipus. This account, in many ways, as Margaret Homans (1986:5) points out, supports and is supported by the androcentric implications of many other classical myths "that have always informed Western culture's myths of itself." In explanation of Lacan's theory, she points out that,

"The father, who is discovered to have all along been in possession of the mother, intervenes in the potentially incestuous dyad of mother and child. Because what marks the father is the possession of the phallus, the phallus becomes the mark of sexual difference, that is, of difference from the mother. The phallus becomes the mark of language's difference as well, which becomes equivalent to sexual difference."(1986: 6)

The Oedipus crisis thus accounts for the severing of the child from its dependence on the mother by means of a castration threat⁵ which, in the words of Elizabeth Grosz, (1989:48) "...pits the child's narcissistic investment in the integrity of its body against its desire for access to the mother's body." The child thus enters the socio-symbolic order and the privileges associated with the 'Name of the Father'.

The sexual specificity of this account is examined by Margaret Homans (1986), in which she suggests that Lacan's theory accounts for the son's position in relation to the symbolic order and language (a position fully
accepted by Kristeva), but does not account adequately for the daughter's, whom she considers to maintain a continuing relationship with the mother.

"The symbolic order is founded, not merely on the regrettable loss of the mother, but rather on her active and overt murder. Thus a feminist critique begins by indicating the situation in which women are placed by a myth of language that assumes the speaker to be masculine." (Homans 1986:11)

Homans suggests that the figurative in language is privileged by the masculine, whereas the literal, like all else associated with the female, is devalued and silenced. It is this idea of exclusion to which my images, Cross Word Pieta (figure 2) and Thirty Silver Words (figure 3) refer.

In Untitled Three, I discuss Kristeva's account of abjection (1982). To briefly summarise the many aspects of Kristeva's essay on abjection, is no straightforward task. In many ways, it is a discussion very much concerned with the body, and the ambiguous positioning of the body in patriarchal culture. Abjection, in the context of a dualistic configuring of self as body and soul, and where the soul is privileged, is a horror of the inherently organic and mortal body. Because of its material nature, the body, to those with aspirations of immortality, is perceived negatively and, as with all oppositional pairs, the negative aspect is considered to be female.

Kristeva discusses abjection in terms of the maternal semiotic 'other' erupting into the 'clean and proper' symbolic order, and the efforts of that order to diminish such a threat by an elaborate series of rituals and taboos. The submerged and excluded (m)other, upon whose absence the symbolic is 'erected', is never fully obliterated, "...but hovers at the
borders of our existence, threatening the apparently settled unity of the subject with disruption and possible dissolution." (Grosz 1989:71)

That which does not obey borders, positions and rules and thereby disturbs identity, system and order is considered abject (Kristeva, 1982:4). The human body attests to such a defiance of borders by incorporating food and other substances, and expelling the same in the form of excrement and bodily wastes. This defiance is especially true of the female/maternal body in its functions of menstruation, giving birth and lactating.

Another aspect of the maternal body, its jouissance, is also a cause for concern, for it is an affront to the myth of paternal creation and to the symbolic order, with its system of signs "whose aim is to accredit communication as exchange purified of pleasure" (Kristeva, 1986:150)

"It follows that jouissance alone causes the abject to exist as such. One does not know it, one does not desire it, one joys in it. Violently and painfully. A passion ... bursts with the shattered mirror where the ego gives up its image in order to contemplate itself in the Other....It is simply a frontier, a repulsive gift that the Other, having become alter ego, drops so that "I" does not disappear in it but finds, in that sublime alienation, a forfeited existence. Hence a jouissance in which the subject is swallowed up but in which the Other, in return, keeps the subject from foundering by making it repugnant." (Kristeva 1982:9)

The mother’s jouissance threatens the symbolic one because it involves an enjoyment that is "private and personal" rather than one that serves the "public and common good which is an unchangeable good." St. Augustine is quoted by Kristeva (1986a: 144, her italics), articulating views on the association of Eve with the serpent, whereby the first sin, the original sin of sexual enjoyment, is that of a woman.7 It is to this enjoyment that I refer in my image Copper Coil Pieta, (the copper coil
suggestive of the contraceptive device known as an IUD), where the use of contraception frees women from the constraints of childbearing, and where sexuality now functions as a private and personal concern, rather than one that is concerned solely with procreation and therefore for the public and common good. 8

Untitled Four is at a slight angle to the previous chapters, which are linked thematically to my visual research. In this chapter the work of another artist, Jane Campion is considered, in an analysis of her recent film, The Piano. This film is a story of language, and Campion explores the complexity and ambiguity of acquiring language through her character Ada McGrath, who has not spoken since she was six years of age.
This chapter looks at the exclusion of the mother/female as a creative force, from the mythologies of Western civilisation; mythologies which merge in Greece, and eventually unify in Rome. However, this is not an historical account, but a thematic crossroads, a juxtaposing of ideas and images.

Encountering this image of Aphrodite\(^1\) (figure 1) for the first time, I was immediately struck by its likeness to depictions of 'Christ crucified' or 'Christ being taken down from the cross'; the outstretched arms, the gentle handling of the body at death, the cloth making ready to cover, conceal and prepare for burial. Apart from the serene, alive and smiling face, the femaleness of the body, indicated by the breasts, belies this perception.

During the course of my research, I have taken the opportunity to probe this visual ambiguity\(^2\) further, and have used the image as a starting point from which to contemplate, or investigate, visually and textually, certain ideas relating to exclusion.

I find it intriguing that it is often at the location of such ambiguity, the threshold indicating the boundary between 'same' and 'difference', that link \(and\) separation are to be found. Initially I would like to look at some of the boundaries or, locations of ambiguity, that are situated
Figure 1. The Birth of Aphrodite
between readings of this image and various ideas on the Crucifixion, as Aphrodite and Jesus are both located at such boundaries of meaning.

Aphrodite was initially a fertility goddess who embraced all of nature, and was only later equated with love in all its aspects. Exuding an aura of seduction and feminine beauty, it would seem that she existed on the threshold between the great goddess and fertility cults on the one hand, and the emergence of monotheism and patriarchy on the other. Kristeva notes that monotheism "...represents, along with paganism, the greater part of agrarian civilisations and their ideologies, women and mothers." (1986a: 141)

Similarly, she points out how Christianity appropriated, in the figure of the Virgin Mary, elements from an older, preceding goddess culture,

"The practice of honouring Christ's mother, his Nativity, or her 'Dormition' comes to Western Christianity from the Orthodox Catholic church, which succeeded in annexing the Oriental rites of mother goddess and fecundity. It strained biblical and evangelical interpretation to make it seem as if the rites were derived from these texts, as if they had always been inscribed in them." (Kristeva, 1980a: 251)

Greil Marcus also points out that every new manifestation in culture, every new ideology, rewrites the past and re-presents the present, not only to reflect and reiterate the values of that ideology, but to make it seem part of a natural order of things, as if it has always been so, for "ancestry is legitimacy" (1989: 21) He suggests that the old, or previous ideology, does not disappear but becomes the submerged other. Thus, "...in all times forgotten actors emerge from the past not as ancestors but as familiars." (ibid.:21)
Christ too, is also located at a boundary, that between Judaism and Christianity; between the love of the son and the authority of the father. The Word becomes flesh, and is obedient to the Father. The submission of the son to the will of the father indicates a certain identification, in psychoanalytic terms, with the maternal. "When the boy does not identify with his mother to submit like a woman to his father, he becomes his fathers rival..." (Kristeva, 1986a: 148)

In relation to this idea she also notes

"...a rather 'unfeminist' Master Eckhart emphasised Mary's assimilation to Christ, justified by the Assumption, by asserting that Mary is only the image (fantasy?) of Christ himself, to the extent that, although a man (but like a woman?) he belongs to the father." (Kristeva, 1980a: 251)

This idea of Christ taking on female attributes is not particularly new. In the Middle Ages, Christ's humanity was considered female, in many ways, due to the association of the female with body made by philosophers and theologians alike. Caroline Walker Bynum stresses this point in her essay on the female body,

"Medieval thinkers associated body with woman. They also associated body with God, through the doctrine of Incarnation, and eschewed sharp body/soul dichotomies more than did either patristic theology or those of the early modern period" (Bynum, 1989: 174)

In this essay, she explores the intense and peculiarly somatic qualities of female experience and spirituality during the Middle Ages, where Christ appears in visions as a dish of chopped meat "like that of a child" (ibid., 161), or as a female body crucified. She interestingly notes that these visions appear to violate boundaries "between spiritual and physical, male and female, self and matter." (ibid., 161)
She argues that despite the fact that standard accounts of this period emphasise its misogyny and dualism, the bodiliness of women is clearly associated with the bodiliness of God and therefore to equate Christ with being female was not at all unusual. In fact, Christ's flesh was treated as female "in certain of its salvic functions, especially its bleeding and nurturing" (ibid.:175). Ecclesia too, Christ's body, is a female personification, and God's tender and nurturing care for souls is often described as 'motherly'.

"Both male and female mystics called Jesus 'mother' in his eucharistic feeding of Christians with liquid exuding from his breast in his bleeding on the cross which gave birth to our hope of eternal life" (ibid.:176)

The theological doctrines of Immaculate Conception and bodily assumption, coupled with the idea that Christ's body came entirely from Mary clearly indicates his associations with female flesh, and with the maternal body.\(^7\)

Of course these equations and ideas could be seen as representing the appropriation of a goddess function by a patriarchal male god. Kristeva, in her essay dealing with the various psycho-social cults of the Virgin, suggests that

"This resorption* of femininity within the Maternal is specific to many civilisations, but Christianity in its own fashion, brings it to its peak. Could it be that such a reduction represents no more than a masculine appropriation of the Maternal?" (Kristeva, 1986b:163)

By medieval times masculine appropriation of the mother was well established, preceding Christianity in the form of Jewish monotheism, where the function of maternity was suppressed in favour of a myth of

\(^*\) resorption is spelt thus by Kristeva, presumably a derivative of re-absorption
paternal creation. Judeo-Christian beliefs were filtered through Greek thought, with its inherent ideas of body/soul separation, to form the basis of Western culture. The dualism implicit in the gospel of St. John, where the Word is deemed the beginning, "the Word was with God and the Word was God" (1:1), and the ensuing separation of light and darkness, establishes not just a separation, but a power struggle between light and dark, one and other "a light that darkness could not overpower" (1:5). (figure 2).

Kristeva considers that the form of religiosity known as monotheism

"...corresponds to the function of human symbolism, which is to provide an agency of communication and cohesion despite the fact that it works through interdiction and division (thing/word, body/speech, pleasure/law, incest/procreation..."

(Kristeva, 1986a:142)

Originally everything was One; one body, one with the mother. But since the absence of the mother is required in order to maintain a myth of paternal creation, the One representing unity becomes symbolic, since it cannot be physical. This, for Kristeva

"...represents the paternal function: patrilinear descent with transmission of the name of the father centralises eroticism, giving it the single goal of procreation. It is then caught in the grip of an abstract symbolic authority which refuses to recognise the growth of the child in the mother's body..." (1986a: 142)

With regard to the representative, symbolic One, Norman Brown points out that representation is the essence of social contract, whereby a group of individuals confer their collective power on one, who in turn represents their unity (1966:110). Representation, he notes, "...is the form by which a political society gains existence for action in history."

OVERLEAF: Figure 2. Cross Word Pieta (1993)
IN THE BEGINNING WAS THE WORD

THE WORD WAS WITH GOD AND THE WORD WAS GOD. HE WAS WITH GOD IN THE BEGINNING THROUGH HIM ALL THINGS CAME TO BE NOT ONE THING HAD ITS BEING BUT THROUGH HIM ALL THAT CAME TO BE HAD LIFE IN HIM AND THAT LIFE WAS THE LIGHT OF MEN.
(ibid.: 112) He also comments that to have history is synonymous with having wars "the purpose of which is to put down the historical acts of other peoples" (ibid.: 112).8 In relation to having wars, Kristeva notes that monotheism is not only sustained by a separation of the sexes, but

"...even more essentially, Yahweh formulates the code of eroticism between the two seeds as though it were a code of war. An endless war where he will lose his gland...and she her trace, her limit, her succession..." (Kristeva, 1986a: 143, her italics)

Women therefore, being excluded from symbolic representation, are thus excluded from history. And, as God generally speaks to men (ibid.:110), they are also excluded from the legislating principle known as the Word, from the law of the community (figure 3) and its political and religious unity, and from the social value of childbearing. Their exclusion is summarised by the mythical relationship between Eve and the serpent who, placed in opposition to God and Adam, symbolises a separation of the sexes which not only sustains monotheism, but becomes its prerequisite. (Kristeva 1986a: 141)

Christianity, as an extension of Judaic monotheism, while perpetuating the dichotomies of soul/body, male/female, light/darkness, allows woman to participate in the socio-symbolic unity, insofar as she remains a virgin. Essentially, while bearing the word, re-producing and propagating the race, she is required to deny her maternal body, her sexuality, her enjoyment, her jouissance, thus reinforcing the myth of God the Father, 'creator of all things'. For mothers,

"Silence weighs heavily on the corporeal and psychological suffering of childbirth and especially the self-sacrifice involved in becoming anonymous in order to pass on the social norm..."  
(Kristeva, 1986b: 183)
This sacrifice is alluded to by Chaim Potok (1973), where the author explores the dilemma of a young Jewish artist (that imaginary committer of incest?),\(^9\) Asher Lev, who is torn between his Judaic belief (represented by his father) and the calling of his art. The elders of the Judaic community grudgingly and watchfully allow him to pursue his calling as an artist and, while his mother encourages him, she is nevertheless subject to the authority of the father, and is subsequently torn between the two. As Kristeva comments, the artist suspects that

"...it is from the mothers side that the unverifiable atemporal 'truth' of the symbolic order and its time springs out and explodes." (Kristeva, 1986a:154)

Asher Lev perceives, but only dimly, his mother's years of anguish, her torment as she is trapped between two different ways of giving meaning to the world, quietly feeding and nourishing them both. His story climaxes when he paints an image of his mother crucified,

"I drew the frame of the living room window of our Brooklyn apartment. I drew the strips of wood that divided the window....On top of the window I drew my mother in her housecoat, with her arms extended along the horizontal of the blind, her legs tied at the ankles...I arched her body and twisted her head...I split my mothers head into balanced segments, one looking at me, one looking at my father, one looking upwards. The torment, the tearing anguish I felt in her, I put into her mouth, into the twisting curve of her head, the arching of her slight body, the clenching of her small fists, the taut downward pointing of her thin legs...'"

'...For all the pain you suffered, my mama...For all the dreams of horror.... For the nights of waiting, for the memories of death...For all the love I have for you...For these things I created this painting - an observant Jew working on a crucifixion because there was no aesthetic mould in his own religion into which he could pour a painting of ultimate anguish and torment"  (Potok, 1973: 287-8)
This description is comparable to Kristeva’s personal account of the maternal body during pregnancy, an account which she juxtaposes with a discussion of the Virgin Mary. She writes thus,

"On the one hand - the pelvis: centre of gravity, unchanging ground, solid pedestal, heaviness and weight to which the thighs adhere, with no promise of agility on that score. On the other - the torso, arms neck, head, face, calves, feet; unbounded liveliness, rhythm and mask, which furiously attempt to compensate for the immutability of the central tree. We live on that border, crossroads beings, crucified beings" (Kristeva, 1986b: 178-9)

In painting this image, Asher Lev, a practicing Jew using the symbol of Christianity, offends his family and outrages the elders of his community, who subsequently expel him. He is henceforth, unacceptable to his race, and is cast out. This act separates him from his own people, his family, his mother. Asher Lev thus crosses the border, like Cain, into exile; wandering the earth, a stranger suspended between two worlds, as one rejected without a home. For him therefore, this painting about a mother’s anguish, is fixed at the threshold of a son’s loss of mother and a mother’s loss of her child.

The Pieta is an image of a mother cradling her dead child, tormented at such loss; loss at birth, loss at death.

The mother holding the dead body of Christ in her lap, and mourning his loss plays a defining role for women within our culture, where not only does she sacrifice her self in giving birth and becoming anonymous, as Kristeva suggests, but she sacrifices her son to a ‘higher purpose’, for the common good. Her role is defined as one of suffering and sacrifice.  

10
Kristeva speaks of the loss, the abyss that opens up at the birth of her child, between her body and what has been inside. The severing of the umbilical chord renders her child 'other' and inaccessible. She considers that a mother is a continuous separation, a division of the very flesh. "...I confront the abyss between what was mine and is henceforth but irreparably alien" (Kristeva, 1986b: 178)

The 'other' who is "irreparably alien' has been inside, at one with the maternal body, but is now thrust out and rendered separate, a stranger. Insofar as we have all been separated through birth, we are all strangers. Kristeva speaks of discovering her own 'disturbing otherness', "the foreigner is within me, hence we are all foreigners" (1991: 192)

To conclude then, I return to the image of Aphrodite, whose birth represents her transformation from a creative, fertile earth goddess to a goddess of beauty and seduction; whose birth from the water means her separation from the mother. Her function as earth mother is appropriated by the god of monotheism and she is replaced by the figure of a virgin mother, a shadow of her former self. Born of the severed genitals of Uranus,11 Aphrodite is poised on the threshold between two worlds of meaning. She is born of a father alone, and the absence (death) of a mother indicates the appropriation of her own life giving, creative function by the father. She is being born, rendered separate, rendered strange. Or perhaps she is being baptised, 'Christened' in the true sense of the word? In the name of the father.....
LORELEI

It is no night to drown in:
A full moon, river lapsing
Black beneath bland mirror-sheen,

The blue water-mists dropping
Scrim after scrim like fishnets
Though fishermen are sleeping,

The massive castle turrets
Doubling themselves in a glass
All stillness. Yet these shapes float

Up towards me, troubling the face
Of quiet. From the nadir
They rise, their limbs ponderous

With richness, hair heavier
Than sculpted marble. They sing
Of a world more full and clear

Than can be. Sisters, your song
Bears a burden too weighty
For the whorled ear’s listening

Here, in a well-steered country,
Under a balanced ruler.
Deranging by harmony
Beyond the mundane order,
Your voices lay siege. You lodge
On the pitched reefs of nightmare,

Promising sure harbourage;
By day, descent from borders
Of hebetude, from the ledge

Also of high windows. Worse
Even than your maddening
Song, your silence. At the source

Of your ice-hearted calling-
Drunkenness of the great depths.
O river, I see drifting

Deep in your flux of silver
Those great goddesses of peace.
Stone, stone, ferry me down there.

(Sylvia Plath, 1960: 22-3)
He Swam Like a Stone

He swam like a stone
the link was small
between his body
and the deep well.

Mud oozed from his eyes
a flowing thread
of green weed
parcelled him dead.

Flesh and water
once knew how
to live together
at heart flow.

(Janet Frame, 1967: 82)
"What if Ward Seven were but a subaqueous condition of the mind which gave the fearful shapes drowned there a rhythmic distortion of peace; and what if, upon my getting up from my bed, the perspective was suddenly altered, or I was led into a trap where a fire burning in the walls had dried up the water and destroyed the peace by exposing in harsh daylight the submerged shapes in all their terror? (Frame, 1980:69)

In this excerpt from *Faces in the Water*, Janet Frame articulates the ambivalence of language, where the safety of a subaqueous condition is (reluctantly) forsaken for the harsh daylight of language. However, in attempting to use language to reveal the contents of this submerged condition, the result could be disastrous.

Elizabeth Abel (1982:1-8) correctly points out that sexuality and textuality both depend on difference, and that difference is converted to hierarchy. In relation to this she notes that "women's writing is a 'double-voiced discourse', that always embodies the social, literary, and cultural heritages of both the muted and the dominant." (ibid.:3)

Janet Frame's metaphor for the muted is the subaqueous (maternal) condition; the 'harsh daylight' is the dominant language of the father. However, the articulation of the muted through language becomes ambivalent for women writers, and it is this position which is discussed in this chapter.
I start by returning briefly to the writing of medieval women, where trances, levitations, catatonic seizures, miraculous elongation or enlargement of parts of the body, ecstatic nosebleeds, the inability to eat anything (holy anorexia), miraculous lactation, mystical pregnancy—are all cited by Caroline Walker Bynum (1989), as peculiar to female mystics and holy women during the Middle Ages. Some of these women's descriptions of tasting God, or kissing Him deeply, going into his heart or entrails, or being covered by his blood "...from a modern point of view, hopelessly blur the line between spiritual or psychological, on the one hand, and bodily or even sexual on the other." (Bynum, 1989: 168)

The patriarchal dualism which equates woman with body, may account for the peculiarly somatic qualities of these mystical experiences. Other possible explanations include the fact that certain expectations were placed on the bodies of women; the ideas of self-sacrifice and endurance of pain for instance were reinforced in women. However, as the author interestingly points out, women tended to somatize religious experiences more than men, and the positive significance they attributed to bodily occurrences could be attributed to the more experiential quality in their mystical writing. She draws our attention to the fact that "...men's writing often lacks the immediacy of women's: the male voice is impersonal." (ibid.:168)

This may of course, be attributed to women's lack of theological training at that time, and their exclusion from the formal scholastic Latin which was taught at the universities. They had access only to the vernaculars, the languages they grew up speaking, and as the major literary genres available in these languages were "various kinds of love poetry and romantic stories", the vocabulary they drew on was one of
feeling, experience and immediacy (ibid.:172). The exclusion of women from knowledge and power is evident in this latter explanation.

Articulating women's exclusion from a language that is conceived as phallocentric, is the subject of recent feminist revisions of Freud's oedipal crisis and the Lacanian account of language, whereby the acquisition of language marks the entry of the child into the symbolic order, the 'Law of the Father', and where language is related to sexually specific types of subjectivity. As Elizabeth Grosz comments,"language is not merely a system of naming, labelling or even communicating. It is the threshold of all possible meaning and value." (1989: 39)

The pre-oedipal stage corresponds to the period before language where the child shares with the mother "the semiotic consisting of body language and nonrepresentational sounds" (Kristeva,1980b:124-47). In Kristeva's account the semiotic is explicitly maternal and feminine, and becomes absorbed into the symbolic without being acknowledged by the same. Commenting on this, Elizabeth Grosz notes

"Its silence is the condition of symbolic stability. Civilisation, the symbolic order, the coherent text, then are only possible at the cost of the silencing, the phallicisation, of the maternal chora."
(Grosz, 1989:49, authors italics)

In Lacan's account, acquiring language marks the intrusion of the father into the potentially incestuous relationship of the mother and child. However, as Margaret Homans points out (1986), this account, assuming the speaker to be male, connects language and gender in a way that privileges the masculine and figurative.
"It should be clear that neither the Lacanian myth of childhood nor the cultural tradition it summarises notices that its narrative of the entry into the symbolic order is based on the son's experience of a scene of sexual sameness and difference. It is only for the son, and not the daughter, that the entry of the phallus marks a difference between the mother and the self." (Homans, 1986: 8)

She further stresses that

"The son's search for substitutes for the forbidden body of his mother will therefore constitute, not a universal condition, but a specifically male desire, the desire of the son who must renounce his mother" (ibid.:9)

The son therefore, in searching for substitutes for the lost mother, constructs a series of figures, someone like her. Homans argues that as language is structured as the substitution for the (female) object of signifiers, the absence of the object is required, but its controlled return permitted as something like the object - a figure.

"...a figure moreover, that identifies the mother with the earth: with nature, matter, and also with the literal as a position just outside language, the object to which the figure refers but that the figure sanitarily replaces." (ibid.:10)

Her argument centres around the privileging of the figurative in language and literature over the literal, where the literal, together with nature and matter "to which it is epistemologically linked" (ibid.:4), is traditionally classified as feminine.

"A dualism of presence and absence, of subject and object, structures everything our culture considers thinkable: yet women cannot participate in it as subjects as easily as can men because of the powerful, persuasive way in which the feminine is again and again said to be on the object's side of the dyad" (ibid.: 5)
Homans considers that the father/daughter and mother/son relationships are not symmetrical, for the daughter is never encouraged to abandon her mother in the same way as the son is, and therefore she does not experience Lacanian desire, "that is as differentiated from a preoedipal merging with the mother" (ibid.:11). She cites Nancy Chodorow's clinical revisions of Freud in arguing that a daughter's

"...rejection of her mother, and oedipal attachment to her father,...do not mean the termination of the girl's affective relationship to her mother....A girl's libidinal turning to her father is not at the expense of, or a substitute for, her attachment to her mother" (Homans, 1986: 12)

If the daughter therefore, embraces the 'Law of the Father' less enthusiastically than the son, it means that the dyadic mother/daughter relationship is not entirely replaced by the triangular relationship that for Lacan, is the prerequisite of the symbolic order. In Chodorow's view, the daughter does not give up her belief in communication that takes place "in presence rather than absence", in the dyadic relation with the mother prior to figuration (ibid.:14).

"The daughter therefore speaks two languages at once. Along with symbolic language, she retains the literal or presymbolic language, that the son represses....just as there is for the daughter no oedipal 'crisis', her entry into the symbolic order is only a gradual shift emphasis. The daughters retention of this earliest language has profound implications for the differential valuations of literal and figurative" (Homans, 1986: 13)

So there remains, in women's writing, a linguistic trace of the mother/daughter bond, and the 'literal' corresponds, in many ways, to experiential quality of the writing of medieval women. The positive significance given by these women to bodily occurrences is continued in the writing of Virginia Woolf, the Brontes, Sylvia Plath, and especially Janet Frame,
"So we bathed, one in each bath, without screens, gazing curiously at one another's bodies, at the pendulous bellies and tired breasts, the faded whisks of hair, the unwieldy and supple shapes that form to women the nagging and perpetual 'withness' of their bodies." (Frame, 1980:41)

The 'withness' of the feminine body, which is associated in literature with 'literal', can only be construed negatively within a cultural construction that depends on the absence of the mother, and that requires the devaluation of the feminine in order to constantly reinforce its own position as 'natural' and universal.

Marguerite Duras claims that 'feminine literature' is organic, and is translated from blackness, from darkness. "The writing of women is really translated from the unknown, like a new way of communicating rather than an already formed language" (1975:174-6). It is important however, to remember that to write 'literature' at all is to write within the symbolic order (Homans, 1986:20), and the inclusion of a non-symbolic mother-daughter language paradoxically requires symbolic representation. The ensuing conflict for women writers is considered by Kristeva, to generate hallucinations and madness.

"After the superego, the ego founders and sinks. It is a fragile envelope, incapable of staving off the irruption of this conflict, of this love which had bound the little girl to her mother, and which then, like black lava, had lain in wait for her all along the path of her desperate attempts to identify with the symbolic order."

(Kristeva, 1986a:157)

The foundering and sinking of the ego is reminiscent of Virginia Woolf, "who sank wordlessly into the river, her pockets weighed down with stones" (Kristeva, 1986a:157). Hers is an escape from the trap of attempting to reveal the submerged 'other' through language, and/or
an attempt to return to the safety of that subaqueous mother. The desire to make an "inevitable, irresistible and self-evident transition" (ibid.:157) is echoed in the words of Istina Mavet, before she attempts to take her own life,

"Death I said; but it is like truth and from continent to continent we fly within the two words, first-class in the comfort of them, but when it is time for us to leave the words themselves and parachute to their meaning in the dark earth and seas below us, the parachute fails to open, we are stranded or drift wide of our target or, peering over into the darkness and stricken with fright, we refuse to leave the comfort of words." (Janet Frame, 1980:202)

The trap of 'black lava' awaits those with a similar quest of articulating 'in the harsh daylight of language', the contents of the submerged mother; of attempting to communicate the 'mother tongue' in the language of the Father. For women writers especially, who try to articulate the experience of 'femaleness' within cultural constructs which devalue to same, a trap awaits, and the ensuing conflict may account the suicides of many women writers.
THE SUICIDES

It is hard for us to enter
the kind of despair they must have known
and because it is hard we must get in by breaking
the lock if necessary for we have not the key,
though for them there was no lock and the surrounding walls
were supple, receiving as waves, and they drowned
though not lovingly; it is we only
who must enter this way.

Temptation will beset us, once we are in.
We may want to catalogue what they have stolen.
We may feel suspicion; we may even criticize the decor
of their suicidal despair, may perhaps feel
it was incongruously comfortable.

Knowing the temptations then
let us go in
deep to their despair and their skin and know
they died because words they had spoken
returned always homeless to them.

(Janet Frame, 1967:72)
THE AGGRAVATED RAPE
BY THE EVENT INDEED
SIGNIFICANTLY LESS
DEEMED
MOST
SERIOUS
VIOLATION
THE

BLACK MARK
As discussed in Chapter Two, the acquisition of language marks the entry of the child into the symbolic order, or the 'Law of the Father'. I shall retrace my steps briefly here in order to explore another change which occurs simultaneously as a result of the father's intrusion and an awareness of (sexual) difference, namely the establishment of a border which separates self from other, inside from outside. This aspect of individual development is reflected in the cultural establishment of a border or skin which likewise serves to separate the symbolic order from the submerged presence of the (m)other.

The lost relationship with the mother, which is characterised by the non-distinctiveness of inside and outside, is considered by Kristeva (1982: 61-2), to be an unnameable, permeable barrier, passable in both directions by pleasure and pain. Differentiating pleasure from pain by naming the latter, distinguishes one from the other, as it does all other oppositions, and thereby founds the separation inside/outside. The establishment of an inside/outside duality constitutes the means by which the child's body becomes a unified whole, and in turn, the limits of the 'clean and proper' body become a condition for the individual's constitution as a speaking subject. The skin becomes the (imaginary?) boundary between the self and external world, between self and non-self; the border separating that which the ego absorbs as a source of pleasure from that which, within itself gives rise to pain and, is thrust
out, projected, externalised. The skin gives the illusion of keeping the
inside in and the outside out.

"I have a taste in my mouth of musty cloth and I am picking at the
sore on my hand that grows a scab each day like the cover of a
well with myself oozing out of it" (Janet Frame, 1980; 115)

[It is not surprising, that employees who work during a strike, despite
the Union’s order to the contrary, are called 'scabs' in that they threaten
the effectiveness of those united by a purpose, and cross the boundary
which separates employee from manager/employer. The 'scab' is not
aligned with the employer, only used by him and, although a worker,
not accepted as 'fellow worker'; excluded from one and never other, he
is in between.]

Whatever transgresses the inside/outside duality of the self/other
separation, is considered abject, in that it signifies the constant presence
of the (m)other.2 Kristeva very poetically, articulates this in the first
sentence of The Powers of Horror,

"There looms, within abjection, one of those violent, dark revolts
of being, directed against a threat that seems to emanate from an
exorbitant outside or inside, ejected beyond the scope of the
possible, the tolerable, the thinkable. It lies there, quite close, but it
cannot be assimilated." (Kristeva, 1982:1)

Attesting to the impossibility of clear borders, the abject is the
repressed, submerged other who seeps into the symbolic clean and
proper order.3 The mother who never completely disappears, but
dwells 'underground' and occasionally rises to the surface and
permeates the border, like the smell that seems to permeate the body
and the self in Janet Frame's account of life in an asylum.
"It occurred to me that in all my visits to Four-Five and-One I had seen few patients belonging to the ward. Did they hide in burrows? Did they live in the wall and emerge only at mealtime? Or were they perpetually immured, and the smell that oozed from the wood was their personal smell of imprisonment that drained through their skin and their mind and their whole body? " (1980; 83)

One imagines a city that is modernist, hard-edged and clean in its architecture, but occasionally from the grills embedded in the concrete pavements, a smell drifts into the air, reminding the population that the foundations of its city consist of sewers, which serve to eliminate and keep from view that which the city spits out, and which the body rejects as non-self.

"...and their eyes stared dully from their wrinkled leaf-brown faces - the brown colour that most of us had and that I thought to be sunburn and windburn but that I realised was a stain of something else, a color of stagnancy spreading from the inside and rising to the surface of the skin." (Frame, 1980: 113)

The above comment by Istina Mavet in Faces in the Water, is very revealing. In the context of the skin being a boundary separating inside from outside, we realise that it is only with one of our senses that the illusion of such a boundary can be maintained, and even then, not completely. It is by sight that Istina recognises her separation from the external world, looking out through the windows of the asylum, over the wall to the world outside. Similarly, we peer out through the windows of the eyes to that which is external to ourselves, whom we do not see, or only partially. However, in Janet Frame's book she constantly alludes to the senses of smell and taste, those senses which involve the incorporation of the outside world into the body, permeating the borders, defying the illusory integrity of self.
"At mealtimes I sat at my place at the table, without eating, for the ward smell and the strangeness so overcame me and soaked into me that the food and the air and the people tasted of it..."

They thought I was ill. What would they have said if I had told them that illness can be caused by a smell, that it was the smell of Four-Five and-One which was draining all my energy and desire to live? I could not escape from it; I was surrounded by it." (Frame, 1980: 87)

This seeping, from the outside in, and from the inside out, is abject. Like the skin, that illusional barrier which is porous and absorbent, incorporating pollution, fumes, moisture and thrusting those substances out again in the form of odour, sweat, tears, the inmates of the fictitious Cliffhaven threw gifts and rejects - crusts, faeces, shoes - over the asylum wall "in a barrage of love and hate for what lay beyond." (ibid.: 46)

The collaborative image by Dorothy Cross and Willie Doherty (figure 4) which appeared on the cover of Circa magazine (summer issue, 1993), very obviously draws on the idea of skin in relation to borders and abjection. In fact, the juxtaposition of image and text accurately articulates the many aspects of Kristeva's essay on abjection (1982). On the one hand there is the skin, lined and blemished, wrinkled and hairy, from which protrude the teats, the udders, the passages through which the inside flows out in the form of milk. Milk and skin. The editor of Circa, Tanya Kiang very evocatively, comments that Cross "...reaches underneath language to milk it's sexually ambivalent body" (1993:11). Kristeva begins her essay on abjection by using the metaphor of skin forming on milk,

"When the eyes see or the lips touch that skin on the surface of milk - harmless, thin as a sheet of cigarette paper, pitiful as a nail

OVERLEAF: Figure 4. Image by Dorothy Cross & Willie Doherty, 1993
paring - I experience a gagging sensation and, still further down, spasms in the stomach, the belly..." (Kristeva, 1982: 2-3)

Kristeva's metaphor alludes to the inherent ambiguity of the notion of boundary, where the border and what it contains, and ultimately, what is expelled are all the same substance. The skin is repulsive because it is the subject's skin, the boundary which the child wishes to spit out.

"...I am in the process of becoming another at the expense of my own death. During that course in which I become, I give birth to myself amid the violence of sobs, of vomit. Mute protest of the symptom, shattering violence of a convulsion that...is inscribed in a symbolic system..." Kristeva (1982:3)

Dorothy Cross' image is a more bodily articulation of Kristeva's metaphor; it is more earthy, more compellingly repulsive. The second aspect of this image is, of course, the text which names those who exist of the edge of society, who transgress boundaries, those whom Kristeva considers as subverting the law of the Father, the symbolic order. Elizabeth Grosz too, in contemplating Kristeva's essay, refers to many of the ideas embodied in the Cross/Doherty image,

"Abjection is what the symbolic must reject, cover over or contain. The abject is what beckons the subject ever closer to its edge. It insists on the subject's necessary relation to death, corporeality, animality, materiality - those relations which consciousness and reason find intolerable. The abject attests to the impossibility of clear borders, lines of demarcation or divisions between proper and improper, the clean and unclean, order and disorder, as required by the symbolic. Symbolic relations separate the subject from the abyss that haunts and terrifies it." (Grosz, 1989: 73)

As the unity of the symbolic order is achieved at the price of the (maternal) body, abjection therefore, a condition of symbolic

OVERLEAF: Figure 5. Copper Coil Pieta (1993)
subjectivity, is specific to the body and its positioning (repression) within that unity. Abjection is a simultaneous desire and repulsion of the body, for the byproducts of corporeality, including bodily fluids, waste, refuse which transgress the inside/outside boundary, are indicative of the subjects organic nature and immanent mortality. It involves the necessary but impossible desire to transcend corporeality. A horror of the body, is therefore a horror of death. And as our culture is constructed on a body/soul duality, where the body is equated with femaleness (and thereby mortality, whereas the soul is immortal), we could say that rejecting the body necessitates a horror of the female body, the body of the (m)other.

Kim Chernin in her investigation of anorexia (1983)\(^6\) examines the body/soul duality, where women bear the guilt of corporeality. She speculates about the alienation from their bodies of many women and its manifestation in the disease anorexia nervosa, in which the mind struggles against the body (ibid.:63). She sees the media promotion of thinness as symptomatic of a, patriarchal fear of the maternal body and as a result of that fear, androcentric culture constructs

"...an ideal image of woman in which she is not yet woman - is unripe, sometimes childlike, with breasts small and undeveloped, the hips narrow, the thighs slim, the shoulders slender. The anorexic girl steps forth. It is an image purged of the power to conjure up memories of the past, of all that could remind us of woman's mysterious power." (Chernin, 1983:148)

If the high incidence of anorexia nervosa among women in our society reflects, as Kim Chernin suggests, a horror of being female at the very moment when women are gaining a measure of access to public life, then bulimia is a spitting out, a constant purging of the self and of female sexuality, and becomes a manifestation of the loathing that has
been projected onto the female body. Once again, woman is allowed to enter the symbolic if she denies her body, and her sexuality, which is no different from being required to remain a virgin. Kristeva notes "the body must bear no trace of its debt to nature; it must be clean and proper in order to be fully symbolic." (Kristeva, 1982:102)

In the following passage by Janet Frame, as in Dorothy Cross' image, the bodily aspects of the cow are intertwined with those of the mother, rendering 'body', 'animal' and 'mother' inseparable.

"And I sat all my life in a gasoline shed under the walnut tree,...with the cow Beauty breathing in my face her yellow and green breath of chewed grass. Her teeth were worn, like white stools often sat upon; a drop of water, like a tear, ran from the corner of her eye down her golden face. Sometimes her behind opened like a crinkled mouth and golden skitter squirted out; and sometimes a streak of foamy pee splashed from the slit by her behind, and blood dripped out, tangling with slimy stuff around her tail. And when I lived in that little house my mother lived there with me, taking out her floppy titties to feed the baby and sometimes giving me a taste, or squeezing a jet of Beauty's milk into my mouth. (Frame, 1980: 174)

I find it intriguing that the cow is named 'Beauty'; beauty being the most highly prized attribute of a woman in our society! And yet this description accounts for all that is deemed undesirable and revolting about the body. Elizabeth Grosz points out that,

"Woman, the woman-mother, does not find her femininity or identity as a woman affirmed in maternity, but rather her corporeality, her animality, her position on the threshold between nature and culture." (Grosz, 1989:79)

Likewise, Kristeva draws attention to the opposition of sin (read corporeality) and beauty,
"...such a conversion into jouissance and beauty goes far beyond the retributive, legalistic tonality of sin as debt or iniquity. Thus it is that, by means of the beautiful, the demoniacal dimension of the pagan world can be tamed." (1982:123)

Janet Frame's narrative is fully accepting of 'body', and betrays no horror as to its functions. This acceptance of the body is a feature of the mother/child relationship before separation ("when I lived in that house my mother lived there with me"), and it is only after the acquisition of language and entry into the symbolic that the body and its functions (excrement and menstrual blood) appear to defile, and that the mother must be kept at a distance. In Frame's account there is a simultaneity of incorporating into and expelling from the three bodies of the cow, mother and child, as if all barriers were permeable and where all three are oblivious to any social taboos or individual defences. This passage in Istina's story can be compared to a later account where she is imprisoned in a locked room, within the boundaries of a mental asylum,

"I smelled the room, I went shopping among the smells - old urine mixed with misery for it was not the honest stench of babies not yet trained but a preserved and outcast adult smell of those who had known and been deprived of their knowing: " (ibid.:204)

Like prisons, asylums are the meeting places of abject and symbolic. As instruments of control yet situated outside society, they are places where the residue of the symbolic is contained, deposited there to be hidden from view or 'rehabilitated'. The idea of being outside the symbolic, and yet confined within boundaries is ambivalent, almost a metaphor for a return to the mother, but without any of the safety of that former condition. In Istina's mind, the peace and pleasantness, and

OVERLEAF: Figure 6. Kienholz; The State Hospital (1966)
the brightness of the bedspreads in Ward Seven is only a veneer, concealing the fact that the room is "laid with traps and hung with hooks." (ibid.: 67).

Frame's allusion to 'an outcast adult smell of those who have been deprived of their knowing', attests to the impossibility of returning to the safety of the mother's body, and that those who exist beyond the threshold of the symbolic, are rendered abject by the ambiguity of their position. Edward Kienholz, in his installation piece entitled The State Hospital (1967), articulates the abjection and deprivation of such institutional confinement (Figure 6).

Frame alludes to the fragility of the situation thus,

"...the prospect of the world terrified me: a morass of despair violence death with a thin layer of glass spread upon the surface where Love, a tiny crab with pincers and rainbow shell, walked delicately ever sideways but getting nowhere, while the sun...rose higher in the sky its tassels dropping with flame threatening every moment to melt the precarious highway of glass. And the people: giant patchworks of color with limbs missing and parts of their mind snipped off to fit them into the outline of free pattern." (Frame, 1980: 38)

The symbolic order, which 'snips off parts of the mind and body' to accommodate it's limitations, draws attention to its own fragility by such acts, and this may account for the fact that eruptions of the 'other', such as madness or crime must be hidden away beyond view. However, a return to the mother is as impossible as eliminating skin to break down borders, or unlearning language once it has been learned. When Frame remarks on those 'who have known, and deprived of their knowing', she means precisely this, that a return to confinement without safety is synonymous with deprivation.
CUT

What a thrill-
My thumb instead of an onion.
The top quite gone
Except for a sort of a hinge

Of skin,
A flap like a hat,
Dead white.
Then that red plush.

Little pilgrim,
The Indian's axed your scalp.
Your turkey wattle
Carpet rolls

Straight from the heart.
I step on it,
Clutching my bottle
Of pink fizz.

A celebration, this is.
Out of a gap
A million soldiers run,
Redcoats, every one.

Whose side are they on?
O my
Homunculus, I am ill.
I have taken a pill to kill

The thin
Papery feeling.
Saboteur,
Kamikaze man-

42
The stain on your
Gauze Ku Klux Klan
Babushka
Darkens and tarnishes and when

The ballad
Pulp of your heart
Confronts its small
Mill of silence

How you jump-
Trepanned veteran,
Dirty girl,
Thumb stump.

(Sylvia Plath, 1965: 23)
Untitled Four

"The way of silence is not only death but incest. The silence which is death is also our mother. The matrix in which the word is sown is silence. Silence is the mother tongue." Brown (1966: 264)

Having explored some aspects of 'the skin of language', I will now look at the work of film-maker Jane Campion, namely her most recent film, *The Piano*, "...that sublime point at which the abject collapses in a burst of beauty that overwhelms us..." Kristeva (1982: 210). This is the story of Ada McGrath (Holly Hunter), an unmarried mother who travels with her daughter Flora (Anna Pacquin) to New Zealand for an arranged marriage with Alistair Stewart (Sam Neil). Ada has not spoken since she was six and her story is an account of the events which led her to accept her role in society as wife and mother. Paradoxically, although she eventually learns to speak, one suspects that as she merges into society, she is silenced in the process.

*The Piano* tells a story of passionate beauty, where horror intervenes, in an attempt to possess and control.

Does not the squelching mud of *The Piano* 's setting in Western New Zealand somehow defile? It does not defile those who walk with feet bare, the Maoris. But the muddied waters, the steaming squelching swamps of mother earth, of primeval goddess's defile only those with long dresses, numerous petticoats, hoops and dainty shoes. It is the women who bear the outward signs of civilisation's restrictions, the trappings of social and bodily restraint, the tight and veiling clothes.
The same 'civilised' attitude is bewildered by the Maoris' relationship to
the land, '...what do they want it for, they don't do anything with it.
They don't cultivate it!' 

Is not the cocooned world of mother and daughter sleeping together in
womblike hoop at the ocean's edge, the symbiotic relationship of
mother and child, where 'child' equals 'daughter' and not the son of
Freudian discourse? This is not only a symbiotic relationship, but an
interchangeable one - where the one can become the other - a
relationship without separation. It is the little girl who translates her
mothers non-verbal language for the world, who becomes an
interpreter and is equally at home in both worlds, with language or
without it. It is she who 'listens' to silent stories without words, who
brushes Ada's hair and is at the same time protector and equal. It is
she who giggles in complicity, like a sister, with her mother in a bed
from which a mystified husband is excluded. It is the daughter who
comes to the rescue (unknowingly albeit, but then so was Oedipus!) of
her mother in the forest. Because the excluded husband has witnessed
his wife's sexual enjoyment with another man, she becomes defiled in
his eyes and can therefore be justifiably raped. As soon as Ada begins
to separate from her daughter/mother (she would not let her little girl
into the house when she was with George Baines, whereas her husband
was always excluded from the mother/daughter relationship), her
husband/father begins to impose restrictions on her movements,
confining her to the house, and treating her body as his property.

"The fantasy of dominance comes bubbling up everytime I am
forced to feel my vulnerability, my impotence. Beneath the
luxurious fantasies of omnipotence there is rage and beneath that
there is the fear contained in my helplessness" Peter McMillan
(1992: 124)
Is not the perforated sheet - to borrow Salman Rushdie’s phrase (1982: chapter 1) - initially discussed by two matriarchs/old maids, very suggestive of a traditional Muslim practice of consummating a marriage, (and indeed conducting all sexual relations) through a hole in a sheet, where the body is entirely covered except at the level of genitals, reducing sexuality to a reproductive activity and denying pleasure in the body. It also serves to reduce all sexuality to the genitals, as does pornography, providing a link between two seemingly opposite standpoints with regard to sexuality, i.e. the severe restriction imposed by society/religion due to a dislike or fear of the body and pornographic depictions of the body which seem to expose it. In the instance of consummating a marriage, the bloodied addition to the sheet is proof of the woman’s virginity and possibly her rape. The bloodied hole is a sign of her property value in relation to her husband, and of her own lack of desire. When the husband waves his conquering flag to the waiting crowd, he is really saying, 'I was here first', and like an American flag on the moon it means 'This is my property'.

In this particular instance, the blood will have to come from a difference source, because Ada already has living proof that she is not a virgin, i.e. she is a mother. In fact, the blood will have to come from an animal, which is significant. This contrivance is echoed in the setting up of the marriage photograph, where a sunny 'stage-set' is assembled outside in the pouring rain and, in the fragile skin of a lace wedding dress that is fitted on over ordinary clothes and which can be torn off so easily. The shedding of the wedding dress reflects Ada’s lack of concern for social conventions and in fact, with the whole institution of marriage. It also reveals the flimsiness and superficiality of 'civilised' conventions taken out of context and placed in such an environment.
We later realise that the perforated sheet, decorated with animal blood, is one of the props of a local theatrical production of Bluebeard's Castle, where the initial perceived 'purpose' is reflected in the violent contents of the play itself. Women poking their heads through holes in the sheet represent bodiless heads hanging on a wall, complete with dripping blood. As another shadow woman is about to be decapitated, this time the wife of the serial killer who has discovered his grizzly secret, the Maoris, outraged, advance on the stage in order to save the woman's life. We laugh because they take the illusion seriously!

Similarly, representations of violence in contemporary cinema become a veil for actual violence, rendering it 'harmless'. The 'represented' violence in the context of this film is of course, a premonition of the violence that is later inflicted on Ada. It is interesting that this violence, inflicted on women is acceptable to the 'civilised' members of the audience, because it is art, it is an illusion, it is culture. But to the 'uncivilised' Maoris it is not acceptable, and we laugh at their innocent (?) intrusion into a theatrical production to put an end to such 'atrocities'. They cannot accept its inherent violence, but we can, because it is art and because we are detached from it.\(^4\) It has also been pointed out to me that the Maori tradition of taking prisoners involved the decapitation of the male leaders and the taking the rest of the population/tribe as slaves. The severed heads would then be displayed publicly, as a constant reminder to the captive slaves. This would have been perceived by the white colonisers as a barbaric practice, but yet they could view the enactment of such violence as entertainment, while happily projecting barbarism onto the other, the Maori.
Jane Campion has set this situation up in an interesting way, because as a viewer, I am in the same position in relation to the 'illusion' of violence as the audience in *The Piano* viewing a theatrical production. The violence Ada suffers at the hands of her husband is truly shocking, and we react to it with horror. It is not just about loosing a finger in a particularly brutal manner, but the implications of this loss, its meaning, that fills us with horror.

When Ada is dragged from the house, the suggestion of decapitation is horrific, but what actually happens is worse. Is the chopping off of her index finger with an axe a metaphor for castration, where her passionate playing of the piano has been brought to an end? Is not this female 'castration' simultaneously the beginning of her initiation to and her exclusion from the speaking world, the symbolic order? Up to this she has chosen not to speak with words, but she *can* communicate. However, she needs her hands to speak, in non-verbal sign language and in the passionate language of music.

Thus it is only because she has been 'castrated' that she is forced into a world of spoken language. This happens because she desires another, and not the one who 'owns' her. Her husband brands her with his mark, the mark of his own limitations, as a rancher would brand cattle, or as the Jews were branded in German concentration camps. It is a sign of her abjection, like the 'mark' of original sin. Because he is excluded from her world, her husband destroys her as a speaking subject - he takes away that by which she speaks. He cannot deal with her desire when it is full and complete - his own repression will not allow him. He is aroused by her more when she is sick, feverish and

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unconscious. She must be rendered weaker than him, before he can 'desire' her.

However, as a waking, fully conscious being, she is a constant reminder to him of his loss of control, of his guilt. It is him who has been defiled by his own action, but he perceives her as being abject, as an insult to his sense of 'civilisation', so he 'gives' her to the other man. An inversion has occurred whereby Stewart, originally seen as the civilised man, becomes brutish, and reveals what lurks beneath his veneer of civilisation.

It is not until she plunges the depths (of narcissism?), the water through which she arrived in whale like vessel, roped umbilically to the piano, that Adachooes to live, to loosen the chord, to come to the surface, to breathe, to speak.

This plunge and subsequent push towards the surface could be seen as a birth. It could also however, be interpreted as a re-birth, a baptism, a cleansing of the original sin (of mother, of jouissance), in other words, being 'born' into the Law of the Father, becoming a 'child' of God, of the Father. In the light of this possibility, the traumatic loss of her finger was perhaps less a metaphoric castration, than a metaphorical cutting of umbilical chord.

Margaret Homans discusses Luce Irigaray's revision of Freud's 'castration' theory thus,

"In her own revisionary myth of motherhood, Irigaray suggest that preceding the famous trauma of castration (which male theorists are so fixated upon that they project onto their daughters as well as their sons) and obscured by its prevalence, lies the
trauma of an earlier cutting that we all experience, the cutting of the umbilical chord that literally links mother and child. Like the primordial murder of the mother that makes possible the symbolic order, the cutting of the chord, she argues, must be forgotten by culture in order that it may foreground the severing of the phallus, that figurative and uniquely male connection to the mother the lack of which makes symbolic language a specifically male domain." (Homans, 1986: 24)

The final loosening of the rope in baptism finalises the separation not just from the mother, but from the world of the mother that is characterised by non-verbal communication.

It is only after this traumatic event that Ada takes her place in society as wife, mother and teacher, and begins to learn spoken language, which, on her own admittance, she never does very well.

But because she can never really come to terms with spoken language, and her previous passionate and non-verbal language has been taken away, Ada can never fully enter into the world in which she is now placed, as a speaking subject. But in her depths, her dream, her subconscious and submerged self, she is still umbilically attached to a pre-language expression, floating between two worlds, mid-way between seabed and surface. A shell, a defiled corpse, silently roped to a piano in the depths of the ocean.
WORDS

Axes
After whose stroke the wood rings,
And the Echoes!
Echoes travelling
Off from the centre like horses.

The sap
Wells like tears, like the
Water striving
To re-establish its mirror
Over the rock

That drops and turns,
A white skull,
Eaten by weedy greens.
Years later I
Encounter them on the road-

Words dry and riderless,
The indefatigable hoof-taps.
While
From the bottom of the pool, fixed stars
Govern a life.

(Sylvia Plath, 1965:86)
CONCLUSION

Throughout this discussion I have addressed the issue of the maternal body in relation to the Symbolic Order. Culturally, the mother is silenced and appropriated, and actual mothers, as Kristeva (1986b:183) points out, become self-sacrificing in the process of childbirth and anonymous in passing on cultural norms. The image of Aphrodite with which I started my discussion becomes the Christ figure, the male god, who takes on both roles, maternal and paternal.

However, the role of the mother in our society is changing rapidly and, as fathers play a greater part in care-giving, the traditional roles of both parents in Western society shift accordingly. This will no doubt have a profound effect on the development of the subject within our culture.

The skin of language which grows over our first experience separates us, one from other, and differentiates us according to gender. Releasing hold of the mother is ambivalent, for it is as necessary as emerging from the womb - not to do so would mean death. As Kristeva point out,

"The abject confronts us...within our personal archaeology, with our earliest attempts to release the hold of the maternal entity even before ex-isting outside of her, thanks to the autonomy of language." (Kristeva, 1982: 13)

Likewise, the language which covers over separation is also ambivalent, for although an agent of communication, it is stretched over an abyss. This skin however, is often fragile, and the submerged maternal other, from which we are separated, oozes into the symbolic,
disrupting it. Ironically, this does not mean that actual woman can disrupt this order.

Kristeva (1982) considers as abject, that which transgresses the borders of the symbolic. In her account of the transgressive use of language by avant-garde writers (she specifically discusses the writer Celine), she does not accord the feminine this subversive position and considers that only men are in a position to subvert the symbolic. In relation to this, Elizabeth Grosz notes that "this may be because, in not occupying a phallic position in the symbolic, women can only imitate men, act in ways that are modelled on men's behaviour" (1989:68). However, it may also be the case that if, as Margaret Homans (1986) suggests, the female never enters as fully into the symbolic as the male, transgression, is not an issue for women, for the symbolic's prohibition of incest applies to the son and not the daughter.

"If the mother-daughter language...is continuous from childhood and is therefore, unlike Kristeva's semiotic, neither repressed nor capable of a dangerous return, it is, instead, socially and culturally suppressed and silenced, but silencing and suppression are a very different matter from repression." (Homans 1986:19)

In relation to this position she comments on Celine's writing in relation to that of Virginia Woolf,

"For sons, whose entry into the symbolic order was a response to the prohibition of incest, a return to and of the semiotic is a return of the repressed, and thus for Kristeva best characterised, not only by the rhythmic nonsense of many modern writers, but most particularly by the obscenities that characterise the discourse of Celine. While obscenities commemorate the writer's knowledge that he violates a taboo, I detect no sign of violation, and therefore no taboo, in such passages...from Woolf." (Homans 1986:19)
I would conclude therefore that the feminine relation to the symbolic and to language is different from the masculine, and I agree with Margaret Homans that difference becomes hierarchical and that the female is devalued within this system. Subversion is perhaps not an issue for women writers but, to define the specificity of women's writing is another matter, and beyond the scope of this paper.
NOTES

Introduction

1. The first half of Kristeva's book *About Chinese Women* (1987), appeared in essay form in a collection entitled *The Kristeva Reader* (1986). It is from *The Kristeva Reader* that all quotations in this text are cited, as I have not referred to the more anecdotal and extensive, second part of Kristeva's 1987 book.

2. For interpreters of Kristeva, I have used:- Elizabeth Grosz, (1989: 39-104), and (1990: 147-167); Toril Moi, (1985: 151-173)

3. Reported in the *Sydney Morning Herald*, 13th May 1993, p.10

4. I have used works by interpreters of Lacan:- Elizabeth Grosz, (1990); Julia Kristeva, (1980); Luce Irigaray, (1985) and Margaret Homans, (1986: 1-39)

5. For this account I mainly use Freud's lecture entitled *Femininity* (1974: 112-133)

6. Luce Irigaray has also explored the feminist view of a continuing mother/daughter relationship in the context of Lacan's account of language (1985)

"Whenever that carnal or animal sense, therefore, introduces into this purpose of the mind, which uses the living force of reason in temporal and corporeal things for the purpose of carrying out its functions some inducement to enjoy itself...then the serpent, as it were, addresses the woman." (1963: 362 and 359-60)

8. With the emergence of the AIDS virus it could be argued that sexuality is not just a matter of personal or private concern.

Chapter 1

1. This relief is identified by John Boardman et al., (1967:340, illustration 184) :- "Ludovisi Throne, Centre panel. Birth of Aphrodite from the sea. Parion marble. Height 87cm ca. 460 B.C. Rome, Museo delle Terme."

2. This work is of course, not inherently ambiguous, dating from 4 centuries B.C.. Rather its perceived 'ambiguity' is more to do with what I bring with me in terms of outlook and cultural background to this, or any, image.

3. Originally, according to F. Guirand (1967), Aphrodite was of oriental origin, possibly Phoenician, sister of the Assyro-Babylonion Ishtar and the Syro-Phoenician Astarte.

"In origin, Aphrodite, like the great Asiatic goddesses, whose domain embraced all of nature, vegetable and animal as well as human. Afterwards she became the goddess of love in its noblest aspects as well as its most degraded." (Guirand, 1967: 63)
4. Kristeva notes, in the same essay (p. 251), that Mary takes on the authority of a Greek goddess, "sanctioned by the themes of her 'dormition' or Assumption " and being the only human not to die, the distance between herself and her son is essentially eliminated.


6. C.W. Bynum stresses the religious significance of the body in general during the later Middle Ages (1200-1500), and that female spirituality, manifested itself in particularly somatic ways. She also draws our attention to the fact that attitudes to the body were entirely different to our modern day sensibilities. I find her discussion of the cult of relics where "pieces of dead holy people have been revered as the loci of the sacred" (p. 163), particularly interesting, especially in the context of any discussion on abjection. She writes, for example,

"The cult of relics was only one of the ways in which late medieval piety emphasized the body as the locus of the sacred. The graphic physical processes of living people were revered as well. Holy people spat or blew into the mouths of others to effect cures or convey grace. The ill clamoured for the bath water of would be saints to drink or bathe in, and preferred it if these would-be saints washed themselves seldom and therefore left skin and lice floating in the water. Following Francis of Assisi, who kissed lepers, several Italian saints ate pus or lice from poor or sick bodies, thus incorporating into themselves the illness and misfortune of others. Holy virgins in the Low Countries lactated miraculously and cured their adherents with the breast milk they exuded." (Bynum, 1989: 163)

The idea of 'cleanliness is next to godliness' (sounding particularly Protestant!) was obviously not an issue in medieval piety, and draws
our attention to the fact that as different attitudes to body emerge, say for example that cleanliness is of great importance, ideas of abjection also change. In other words, ideas of what constitutes the abject is relative.

7. She does point out that however complex the conceptions of woman and body, there is no denying the misogyny and dualism of such accounts in medieval attitudes, and that 12th and 13th century "literature presented the body not merely as dust but as rotting, a garment masking the food of worms" (p.174). Theologians generally saw the spirit and flesh warring with each other. The author also points out that "theological, scientific and folk traditions associated women with body, lust and weakness and irrationality, men with spirit, reason and strength" (Bynum, 1989: 175).

"Hagiographers too, were inclined to see female sin as bodily or sexual, as arising from within the woman's body, whereas male sinners were depicted as being tempted from without - often indeed as tempted by the proffered bodiliness of women." (ibid, 175)

8. For a very informative analysis on this aspect of wars, see Elaine Scarry (1985: 60-157), where she sees war as similar in structure to that of any contest, but where the task is to 'out injure' the other contestant(s).

"War is in the massive fact of itself a huge structure for the derealization of cultural constructs....The purpose of war is to designate as an outcome which of the two competing cultural constructs will, by both sides, be allowed to become real, which of the two will (after the war) hold sway in the shared space where the two (prior to war) collided." (Scarry, 1985: 137)

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9. Obviously the fetishist, the imaginary committer of incest (Kristeva, 1986a: 154) is the male artist, and this description assumes the exclusion of female artists from the realm of culture.

10. Elizabeth Butler Cullingford (1990) in her essay on the allegorical representation of Ireland as female, as 'Mother Ireland' for example, sacrificing her sons for a just cause. She also discusses how writers such as Yeats and Heaney have used this representation to justify the republican movement. Heaney, in his poem entitled 'The Tollund Man' sees 'Mother Ireland' as the goddess demanding sacrifices for her cause. "Heaney...sees the as IRA pouring out their blood, and the blood of their victims, in order to restore the violated territorial integrity (read virginity) of Ireland." (Cullingford, 1990:3) She also notes that to "...call the Republican ethos a 'feminine' religion is to imply that femininity and barbarism are inseparable." (ibid:2) She concludes that this allegorical use of a female figure reveals an underlying misogyny and fear of real women.

11. "At the instigation of Gaea, his mother, Cronus castrated his father, Uranus, and cast his genitals into the sea. They floated on the surface of the waters, producing a white foam out of which rose Aphrodite." (Guirand, 1967: 64)

Chapter 2

1. The author notes that "The various cultures in which women are more inclined than men to fast, to mutilate themselves, to experience the gift of tongues and to somatize spiritual states are all societies that associate the female with self sacrifice." (Bynum, 1989: 174)
2. She notes that men write of "the mystical experience", giving a general description which may be used as a theory or yardstick, whereas women write of 'my mystical experience', speaking directly of something that may have occurred to them alone." (ibid.:168)

3. C.W. Bynum comments that

"A comparison of two women from the same milieu, Mechtild of Hackeborn and Mechtild of Mageleburg, shows clearly that the one who wrote in Latin wrote more impersonally and to a much greater extent under the influence of the liturgy, whereas the vernacular poet wrote more experientially, with a greater sense of both personal vulnerability and of immediate, special relationship to God." (ibid. p.172).

Another contributing factor to the difference between men's and women's writing is that women's work was often dictated and was therefore spoken, rather than written "...a fact that is clearly one of the explanations for women's more discursive, conversational, aggregative, tentative, empathetic and self-reflective style" (ibid. p. 172).

4. Homans cites Nancy Chodorow (1978) The Reproduction of Mothering; Psychoanalysis and the Sociology of Gender, Berkeley: University of California Press. She also states in her notes on Chapter 1 (no. 9 pp. 290-291) that although Irigaray has explored the implications of a feminist view of mother-daughter relations for Lacanian language, she privileges Chodorow

"...because in Irigaray's view, the mother is wholly appropriated by androcentric culture and that any relation to her daughter consists mainly in provoking the daughter's flight away from her into the symbolic....In my argument Chodorow, with her training as a social scientist, could be said to stand for 'North American' feminist critics with their assumptions that experience can be
referentially represented, while Lacan and Lacanians share the opposite "French" set of assumptions about Language." (Homans, 1986: 290-1, Note 9)

Chapter 3

1. See Kristeva "As if the fundamental opposition were between I and Other or, in more archaic fashion, between Inside and Outside." (1982:7)

2. In relation to that which transgresses the border of the skin, Kristeva notes

"The body's inside...shows up in order to compensate for the collapse of the border between inside and outside. It is as if the skin, a fragile container, no longer guaranteed the integrity of one's 'own and clean self' but scraped and transparent, invisible or taut, gave way before the dejection of it's contents. Urine, blood, sperm, excrement then show up in order to reassure a subject that is lacking it's 'own and clean self'. The abjection of those flaws from within suddenly become the sole 'object' of second desire - a true 'ab-ject' where man, frightened, crosses over the horrors of maternal bowels and, in an immersion that enables him to avoid coming face to face with another, spares himself the risk of castration. But, at the same time that immersion gives him the full power of possessing, if not being, the bad object that inhabits the maternal body." (1982: 53-4) She also writes of the "...desirable and terrifying, nourishing and murderous, fascinating and abject inside of the maternal body." (ibid. p.54)

3. Kristeva cites George Bataille as recognising the link of abjection to the inability "to assume with sufficient strength the imperative act of excluding." (1982:64) The production of the abject is therefore linked to the weakness of prohibition.

4. Author's spelling.
5. For Kristeva’s ideas on the defilement of excrement and menstrual blood, and its subsequent ritualization, see chapter entitled From Filth to Defilement (1982:71-89)

"Fear of the archaic mother turns out to be essentially fear of her generative power. It is this power, a dreaded one, that patrilinear filiation has the burden of subduing." (1982: 77)

6. This topic is also discussed at length by Naomi Wolf (1990) The Beauty Myth, London: Chatto and Windus

7. For an extensive account on such elements of control see Michel Foucault, (1977) Discipline and Punish - The Birth of the Prison, New York: Pantheon Books

Chapter 4

1. Mud and bogs were regarded in earlier times, as the abode of the great Earth goddess of pre-Christian Europe. The latter part of this tradition is examined by P.V. Glob (1969), whereby the discovery of preserved bodies in peat bogs in Denmark, were found to be 2000 years old. Glob’s investigations led him to conclude that these preserved bodies were, in all probability, the remains of victims sacrificed to a fertility goddess who was believed to have dwelt in bogs, which 2,000 years ago would have been swampy, marshy places.

"So far as can be inferred from archaeological finds of the Celtic Iron Age it was a goddess that was dominant in the northern circles of deities; and she already held dominance in the last two phases of the Bronze Age. The sacrificial deposits of the bogs tell us that this goddess held sway at least two centuries before the Early Iron Age began. " (Glob, 1969: 156)
Glob considers that this goddess, and representations of her, were related to the old Asiatic goddesses Ishtar and Astarte, and the Greek goddess of love and fertility, Aphrodite mentioned earlier in this paper.

2. Even though Stewart, Ada's husband wears tight and restrictive clothing, typical of a Victorian gentleman, the women's clothes are by far more excessively restrictive.

3. Jessica Benjamin (1990) presents a compelling account of the early mother-child relationship, which she calls an 'intersubjective relationship' (pp 11-50), a mutual recognition of mother and child,

"...the exchange of infant and caregiver, are full of the language of recognition. What I call mutual recognition includes a number of experiences commonly described in the research on mother-infant interaction: emotional attunement, mutual influence, affective mutuality, sharing states of mind. The idea of mutual recognition seems to me an ever more crucial category of early experience. Increasingly, research reveals infants to be active participants who help shape the responses of their environment." (Benjamin, 1990:16)

In relation to Freud's views on infant development, she stresses that

"Until very recently, most psychoanalytic discussions of early infancy, early ego development, and early mothering depicted the infant as a passive, withdrawn, even 'autistic' creature.....In Freud's reconstruction, the first relationship (i.e., with the mother), was based on oral drive - a physiological dependency,.....The caregiver merely appeared as the object of the baby's needs, rather than a specific person with independent existence." (ibid, 16)

4. Brown notes that theatre is ritual and that representation is a form of ritual. He states that the "boundary separating actor from spectator is
a false one, concealing the deeper reality of the collective authorship."
(1966: 112-19)

5. This 'exchange' between the two men is not the first, as initially Stewart exchanged Ada's piano for a piece of land. Piano and land were both 'stolen', and exchanged without any reference to the original or true owners.
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APPENDIX 1 - CATALOGUE OF WORKS

I have decided to list my works chronologically rather than according to theme, partly so chronological development can be discerned. The catalogue numbers correspond to the numbered slides in APPENDIX 2.

1. SNAKE (1990)
   acrylic and collage on canvas
   280cm x 170cm
   This piece is part of a whole body of work consisting of paintings and drawings, about the remains of sacrificial victims to a bog goddess that were found in Denmark. (I referred to P.G. Glob's book on the topic, *The Bog People*, see my note no.1. p.62-3). During my stay in Denmark (1984-90) I travelled to various sites to see these remains. Much of the work revolved around the idea of submersion, and a peaceful state reminiscent of a womb experience. The fact that the bodies were preserved by the bog is reminiscent of the belief that the bodies of saints do not deteriorate after death. It seemed to me like these were saints of the goddess.

2. COMMUNION (1990)
   acrylic and collage on canvas
   280cm x 170cm
This work is towards the end of the above series. It is very much a metaphor for pregnancy, but also for death, where the womb is also tomb. This work is also about the problems of communicating, whereby language, although for that purpose, is constructed on separation and division.


   acrylic and collage on canvas

   137cm x 146cm

   This work was not originally named thus, but it is very much a metaphor for patrilinear descent and Kristeva's idea that patriarchy refuses to recognise the growth of the child in the mother's body (Kristeva, 1986a: 142)


   acrylic and collage on canvas

   137cm x 149cm

   This work is similar in theme to the previous one in its ideas of a patriarchal appropriation of maternity. The male figure wears 'pregnancy' only superficially.

5. **SACRIFICE (1991)**

   papier mache, clay, cigarette paper, acrylic paint

   30cm x 40cm

   This piece and the one to follow were made for a project in Kilmainham Gaol in Dublin. The Gaol, once a symbol of English terror in Ireland, where many were detained, tortured and executed has not functioned as a gaol since 1924. It was restored in the 1970's and is now an historical landmark in Dublin, and a
museum. These pieces were made as 'deathmasks' to commemorate the suffering that happened there. SACRIFICE is modelled on the Tollundmand, one of the bog bodies found in Denmark, and relates to the idea of sacrifice for one's country. As Ireland was allegorically identified as female, writers such as Seamas Heaney compare her to the bog goddess in Denmark who demands sacrifice. Elizabeth Butler Cullingford (1990) analyses these metaphors in relation to such writers, and to ongoing Irish problems.

6. GAMES (1991)
papier mache, clay, cigarette paper, acrylic paint
25cm x 40cm
This piece is more directly about Gaol, where boredom and uselessness (referred to by the childish games of "hangman" and "x's and o's") are coupled with the potential for violence and violation.

7. LOSS (1992)
acrylic and collage on canvas
180cm x 150cm
This is one of the first pieces I made when I came to Australia, so perhaps it describes this sense of loss, in which all other loss becomes accentuated.

8. UNTITLED (1992)
acrylic and collage on canvas
180cm x 150cm
9. UNTITLED (1992)
   acrylic and collage on canvas
   180cm x 150cm

10. ONE(1992)
    charcoal, chalk, cigarette paper, acrylic on brown paper
    112cm x 150cm
    This is again related to a womb-like experience, where an umbilical noose ropes the two figures together, but where a menacing presence is preparing to extract one from its (imagined?) other. It also alludes to the rope that binds the characters Pozzo and Lucky, master and slave, in Samuel Beckett's play (1958), where the rope becomes a symbol of interdependency.

11. LAZARUS (1992)
    charcoal, chalk, cigarette paper, acrylic on brown paper
    112cm x 150cm
    This is again concerned with the cyclic relationship between birth, death, and rebirth

12. UNTITLED (1993)
    charcoal, chalk, cigarette paper, acrylic on brown paper
    112cm x 150cm

13. OLD MAN (1993)
    collage, acrylic, tissue paper, material on unstretched canvas
    260cm x 150cm
collage, acrylic on unstretched canvas
260cm x 150cm
This piece uses as inspiration the story of Orpheus and Eurydice, where it is the female who leads the male into the underworld. Orpheus does not die, but is alive in the country of death pleading for the life of the one he loves. He achieves his aim, but alas loses her again. I have rendered both figures genderless and ambiguous, so it is not clear which one is Orpheus and which is Eurydice. As with all separations, neither one person is completely to blame.

15. **CROSS WORD PIETA (1993)**
charcoal, chalk and gold paint on brown paper
150cm x 113cm
This juxtaposes a female crucifixion with the opening lines of St. John's gospel, contemplating the idea of women's exclusion from androcentric language and culture which has formed part of my discussion in chapter 2.

16. **COPPER COIL PIETA (1993)**
collage, charcoal, chalk and copper paint on unstretched canvas
150cm x 113cm
This work again, using the same image of Aphrodite as a starting point, looks at the idea of abjection in relation to a woman's body. The spiral of course, is a metaphor for snake or umbilical chord, and was used extensively in Celtic iconography. This especially occurs at the sites of megalithic tombs (which were very much
modelled on the womb), and show the journey of the soul through death to find rest and rebirth at the centre.

17. **THIRTY SILVER WORDS (1993)**
collage and silver paint on unstretched canvas
150cm x 113cm

This piece is quoted from Judge O'Byran who decided earlier this year the a rapist did not deserve the maximum sentence because the girl was unconscious (she had been bashed unconscious and had her throat slit) at the time of the rape. Judge O'Byran considered that she was "not traumatized by the event." As noted earlier, THIRTY SILVER WORDS is strongly suggestive of the thirty pieces of silver paid to Judas to betray Jesus. Just as Judas' betrayal is paradoxically necessary to the events on which Christianity is founded, so are Justice O'Byran's sentiments necessary if an order in which women have no value is to be upheld.
The Ambivalent Skin of Language

Antoinette O'Loughlin

Master of Arts (Honours)

1993

University of Western Sydney, Nepean
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ABSTRACT

The position of the maternal body within patriarchy is the topic of this discussion where, rather than looking at a linear sequence of events, various aspects of this position are explored.

The paper consists of four chapters that revolve around the entry of the subject into the order of language, what Lacan calls the 'Symbolic Order'. As the structures of language are marked with social imperatives - the Father's rules, laws and definitions - this order is known as the 'Law of the Father', a law which becomes a defining one for patriarchy.

On an individual level, the intrusion of the father into the dyadic, and potentially incestuous mother-child relationship, marks the entry of the child into the Symbolic Order, and this reflects (or is reflected by) the mythical account of creation in the Old Testament, where actual maternity is repressed in favour of a paternal monopoly in creation. Just as monotheism both represses and appropriates many aspects of the goddess cult which preceded it and which it replaces, the maternal body is repressed and appropriated within patriarchy.

The acquisition of language and awareness of sexual difference marking entry into the 'Law of the Father', are constructed on a duality of self and other, a dichotomy of inside and outside with a border, represented by the skin, separating the two. This border, separating the
symbolic from its other (the mother that never completely disappears) is tenuous and ambiguous, for it is not entirely an impermeable barrier. What seeps across this border, what transgresses the barrier between inside and outside, is considered by Kristeva (1982) to be abject. Positioned at the threshold separating inside and outside, abjection is the threat of the ever present, but submerged (m)other crossing the threshold and disrupting social order. Janet Frame’s account of madness (1980), which is discussed in chapter three in conjunction with Kristeva’s essay on abjection, very aptly illustrates Kristeva’s idea of insanity as an occasion of the abject erupting into the symbolic ((1986a:157-8).

The father’s possession of the phallus becomes the mark of sexual difference (from the mother) and the masculine phallus is thus privileged as the condition for sexual difference within androcentric discourse. It is probable therefore, because of the privileging of the masculine within this order, that the feminine relationship to the symbolic is different. Margaret Homans (1986) relates the devaluing of women’s writing and experience within androcentric culture to this difference and Jane Campion, in her recent film The Piano, tells the story of language from a woman’s point of view.

The poetry of Janet Frame (1967) and Sylvia Plath (1960 & 1965) contemplating the position of the female voice within the symbolic order, serves to link and separate the four chapters. Throughout the paper too, are images selected from an entire body of related visual research which is closely linked to the ideas contemplated here.
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