

Ecstasy and Exile

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Tūruapō

This thesis was initially conceived after an experience I had shortly after completing my Masters degree, an experience that was later transcribed into the short stories “The Serving Woman” and “Catharine in Thirds”. These works portray a central female character who communicates without speaking. I was deeply influenced by the Cathar ideas regarding life, ethics and re-birth. Bernini’s statue of St. Teresa of Ávila was also an evocative image to me (*The Ecstasy of St. Teresa*, Cornaro Chapel, Santa Maria della Vittoria, Rome, 1647-1652). The idea that a text could be ecstatic was initially inspired by Roland Barthes’ arguments in *The Pleasure of the Text* (1973). I knew that as a writer, the ecstatic work would differentiate itself, would help me express my fictive visions, because of its power, immediacy and surreality. I also felt as though ecstatic literature itself was a neglected area of scholarship.

The topic of ecstasy came into closer view critically as I read Michel de Certeau’s *The Mystic Fable* (1982). In those earlier stages I also looked at scientific journals and found M. Dominic Beer’s article on “ecstatic experience”¹. I appreciated how authentic and informed the text was in its insightful differentiations into a mystical experience contrasted with a psychotic experience. I also looked at the ways in which figures such as Sigmund Freud and Jean-Marie Charcot were recording and diagnosing “hysteria”.

¹ M. Dominic Beer, “The Nature, Causes and Types of Ecstasy” in *Philosophy, Psychiatry and Psychology*. The Johns Hopkins University Press, Volume 7, number 4, December 2000.

I was interested in how notions of ecstasy might translate across mystical texts such as Teresa of Ávila's *The Interior Castle*, the writings of Meister Eckhart² and *The Cloud of Unknowing*, amongst others, to twentieth century works of prose such as those by Laura Riding, Réda Bensmaïa, Jean Cocteau, Jules Laforgue, Arthur Rimbaud, Djuna Barnes, William Faulkner and Flannery O'Connor amongst others. I realised that my thesis could not ignore what was coming into view as a strong difference, even a discrepancy, between the two threads *mysticism* and *ecstasy*.

While mysticism is part of ecstasy, ecstasy in writing today separates itself from mysticism in its ironic and questioning attitude toward the existence of God. In terms of an experience, ecstasy without God becomes a time of apocalypse. Laura Riding depicts characters and objects that are constantly leaving or disappearing in *Progress of Stories*, and Réda Bensmaïa examines exile and banishment in *The Year of Passages*. I decided to analyse these two writers in particular because, although they are very different writers, they both belonged, I felt, to the genre of the ecstatic in writing. I have hoped in the critical parts of this thesis to outline some of the approaches and techniques that can be described as being “apophatic” or “negative” approaches that both writers demonstrate.

In the creative section of this thesis, *Oneirium*, I hope that such approaches are performed rather than critically investigated as such. Judeo-Christian references appear throughout *Oneirium* but hopefully one does not have to be religious in any way to read the stories. In “Pupuri to Taonga!” or “Don't Let Them Take Your Treasure!” I have narrated the story from the perspective of a young Māori woman who together with others is falsely accused of conspiring against the government and is sent into exile – literally, in the South Pacific ocean.

² Meister Eckhart, *The Essential Sermons, Commentaries, Treatises and Defense*. Bernard McGinn and Edmund Colledge (trs., eds.), New York: Paulist Press, 1981.

Small floating houses are provided for the group. The story follows the lives the people create in the ocean, how they communicate and how they deal with the inevitable loneliness of their predicament. Today, when there are so many refugees risking their lives for perilous journeys on unstable vessels, I ask the reader to think about how to not support capitalism or war and to earnestly help those who seek asylum because their country is torn apart by warring factions or by despotic governments.

I am indebted to the work of Georges Bataille, particularly his books *Guilty* and *Inner Experience*. There is a certain mode, that elsewhere I have called “the ecstatic of cruelty”, which intersect with ideas of Keats’ “negative capability” to result in unusual and dynamic combinations (see for example the plays of Bertolt Brecht, such as *Mother Courage*). The story “Sweet Nicky” exposes a scene in the woods, a scene of extreme violence, and in writing it I hope to bring attention to the shamefully high rates of domestic violence in New Zealand Aotearoa.

In this chaotic and violent world in which we live, there is still hope that peace will triumph. Exile, especially today, is more relevant and prevalent than it should be. The fact that millions of people are homeless in their own countries of birth is alarming. Immigration policies adopted by the rise of the Far-Right threaten those who are most vulnerable. We must be more open than ever before. The world belongs to the world.

Ecstasy is not delight, not happiness, it is no erotic experience, nor love, nor neutrality, nor wisdom, nor power. Ecstasy is rather like a conversation with another person where both people are talking at once and they both understand one another. The simultaneity is reflective of the new speed at which the practitioner will have to move if they are to accurately portray ecstatic experience.

Ngā mihi

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Dedicated in loving memory of my mother, Paula Therese

See you in the *khora*-place

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Ecstasy – An Introduction

“How can a body be made from the word?”

Michel de Certeau, *The Mystic Fable*

The word ecstasy is derived from the Greek and is etymologically composed of the prefix “ek” put together with “stasis”. What do these terms mean? “Ek” indicates that the action it modifies is momentary or just beginning; it is a primary preposition denoting origin (the point from which action or motion proceeds), from-ness, out-ness (of place, time or cause). “Stasis” is defined as “a standing still”, a period or state of inactivity or equilibrium. For the purposes of this thesis, Jacques Derrida’s definition of ek-stasis is particularly apt: he views it as *une sortie hors de soi*, “an exit out of oneself”. The scholar David Farrell Krell fleshes out Derrida’s application of the term ecstasy: “[t]his *sortie hors de soi – et hors de l’autre*” [and out of the other] – along with the enigmatic notion of the present as “nothing more than the absolute past of a closed future”¹ indicates the conceptually ontological contiguity gestured to in Derrida’s work with ideas of ek-stasis.

Ecstasy can be borne out of nowhere – or equally, perhaps, it can be a concomitant response to witnessing acts of violence, as Bataille has explored at length². Both of the critical writers examined in this thesis experienced the trauma of exile: Réda Bensmaïa, in order to escape the Algerian War, decided to emigrate to the United States, and Laura Riding

¹ David Farrell Krell, ‘History, Natality, Ecstasy: Derrida’s First Seminar on Heidegger, 1964-65’. Published in *Research in Phenomenology*, Vol. 46, Issue 1, p 9.

² Georges Bataille in his quest to experience ecstasy took the transgressive step of meditating on photographs of torture victims. Some of these photographs were published in his work *The Tears of Eros*. Peter Connor (tr.). San Francisco: City Lights, 1989. He has written extensively on the topic of ecstasy. Related works include his titles [Inner Experience](#) and [Guilty](#).

fled Majorca³ at the outbreak of the Spanish Civil War, abandoning several of her manuscripts. Renunciation and surrender were experienced by Riding to a certain degree, as would be required of any person being put through the trauma of living in a time of war.

The ecstatic, then, far from being an exit out of the world, is instead contextually and compositionally concerned with difficulties in being alive in the world, whether difficulties of temporal or spiritual struggle. David Farrell Krell writes further about Derrida's explorations into the themes of history, natality and ecstasy, including "ecstatic time":

[i]f the present is dissimulation, then all manifestation, the very truth of being...becomes withdrawal of an origin that never possessed a present phenomenality...[t]his in turn implies 'an absolute exit, a radical ek-stasis, originary and without return,' une sortie absolue, un ek-stase radicale, originaire et sans retour...⁴

Therefore we can understand that "ekstasis" or ecstasis or "the ecstatic" is ultimately concerned with achieving – in the case of this thesis, through narrative representation – a manifestation of an "absolute exit: out of the self. And these exits are in the service not of escape but of unexpected discovery." Krell furthers his statement in writing further,

It seems to me that one could almost say that ecstatic temporality is pregnant with history, which is waiting to be born [b-o-r-n, without the -e]. And Existenz is waiting

³ While still in London, Robert Graves and Laura Riding had set up the Seizin Press (1927), collaborated on A Survey of Modernist Poetry (1927) (which inspired Empson to write Seven Types of Ambiguity and was in some respects the seed of the New Criticism), A Pamphlet Against Anthologies (1928) and other works. In Majorca, the Seizin Press was enlarged to become a publishing imprint, producing inter alia the substantial hardbound critical magazine Epilogue (1935-1938), edited by Riding with Graves as associate editor. Throughout their association both steadily produced volumes of major poetry, culminating for each with a Collected Poems in 1938. Graves and Riding left Majorca in 1936, at the outbreak of the Spanish Civil War. In 1939, they moved to the United States.

⁴ David Farrell Krell, "History, Natality, Ecstasy: Derrida's First Seminar on Heidegger, 1964-1965". *op. cit.*, p 10.

to give birth to the truth of being. For might we not understand the birth of Daesin ecstatically, that is, as an ek-stasis into ek-sistence as the truth of being?”⁵

Ecstatic experience is described by M. Dominic Beer⁶ as having several characteristics, chiefly among them the distinct “ecstatic knowledge of all things”, or noetic illumination, that surpasses the intellect in the sense that it is a sudden all-encompassing apprehension of reality and of creation as being unified. “Mystical experience” is a term that is interchangeable for “ecstatic experience” here, as the knowledge that one is suddenly filled with is largely of a spiritual nature, or that “all is one”. The lightning-quick speed that such conclusions are arrived at is encapsulated within the scope of the ecstatic work, which, at least in terms of context and urge, commences even before the first word is presented to the reader. The ecstatic approach to narrative representation demands that the usual literary devices such as (cumulative) plot development, stable characterisations and everyday settings be discarded in favour of “designed waste” (Laura Riding), ontological fluidity and *khora*-settings (or the “no-place place”). The attitude of much ecstatic writing is toward expressing (sometimes highly subjective) truth, and the ecstatic work displays a commitment to wrestling with language to “make it work”⁷ harder than before (harder than it does in “realist” writing that Roland Barthes might well call “readerly”). The resultant effect is that the ecstatic work is both unusual and, typically, highly original within its contexts. It often appears to move at an accelerated pace.

Roland Barthes has written at length on the difference between a “pleasing text and a sublime text”⁸ and D. H. Lawrence’s short piece on writing, “The Quick and the Dead of

⁵ *ibid.*, p 9.

⁶ See M. Dominic Beer, “The Nature, Causes and Types of Ecstasy” in *Philosophy, Psychiatry and Psychology*. The Johns Hopkins University Press, Volume 7, number 4, December 2000.

⁷ Lisa Samuels, in ‘Creating Criticism’ notes that the dust jacket on Doubleday’s edition of Anarchism Is Not Enough reads, “Here is cold and concentrated acid from an individual who refuses to be absorbed.” California: The University of California Press, 2001, p xxxiii.

⁸ Roland Barthes’s *The Pleasure of the Text*. Richard Miller, (tr.). New York: Hill and Wang, 1975.

Writing”⁹ both seem to me to describe and indeed preference ecstatic literature (although they of course did not use the term, even as their implications brush against some of those I emphasize here) above all other genres for their own perceived reasons of heightened artistry, exquisite symbolism and evocative imagery. Like the fire or the flame, of the gold Queen in Laura Riding’s “The Story-Pig”, ideas seem to become more vivid, more evocative and more quick – as in “quickly realised” or noetic (“knowledge”).¹⁰

Apophatic Syntax and Approach

It is common to mystical literature that the apprehension of God has been described in negative terms. The background to the kind of texts that form the basis of the tradition of apophatic writing can be found in mystical works such as *The Cloud of Unknowing*, the writings of Angela of Foligno, where she talks about finding God in “non-love” and the corpus of Meister Eckhart. Further evidence of exploration of the negative or “non” or “apophatic” qualities can be found originally in the writings of Dionysius the Areopagite, St. John of the Cross, Teresa of Ávila, the apocryphal gospels such as the Gospel of St. Thomas and Marguerite Porete’s *The Mirror of Simple Souls* (this latter earned the author a sentence of public burning for heresy), in which the reader “soon [sees] the reappearance of her exaggerated hesychasm, the praise of a passivity which Lerner has called ‘theologically most

⁹ In John Braine’s *Writing a Novel* the author quotes D. H. Lawrence, “We have to choose between the quick and the dead. The quick is God-flame, in everything. And the dead is dead. In the room where I write, there is a little table that is dead: it doesn’t even weakly exist. And there is a ridiculous little iron stove, which for some unknown reason is quick. And there is an iron wardrobe trunk, which for some still more mysterious reason is quick. And there are several books, whose mere corpus is dead, utterly dead and non-existent. And there is a sleeping cat, very quick. And a glass lamp, alas, is dead. What makes the difference? *Quien sabe!* But difference there is. And I *know* it. And the sum and source of all quickness, we will call God. And the sum and total of all deadness we may call human, And if one tries to find out wherein the quickness of the quick lies, it is in a certain weird relationship between that which is quick and – I don’t know; perhaps all the rest of the things. It seems to consist in an odd sort of fluid, changing, grotesque or beautiful relatedness.” (p 153).

¹⁰ See article on different types of ecstatic state (ecstasis) by M. Dominic Beer, “The Nature, Causes and Types of Ecstasy” *op. cit.*

questionable' first typified through Mary Magdalene and then through John the Baptist....that even the works performed by Jesus Christ in his active life on earth were 'through the fault of the human race'".¹¹ Even Joan of Arc could be said to have been sent to trial for apophatic and subversive acts: firstly, by dressing as a man, 'being' that which does not exist in her biological body, and secondly for carrying on a (diabolical) dialogue with the saints Margaret and Catherine.¹²

The apophatic way of describing the ineffable seems only appropriate, as it designates a formality and "respectful" distance from the figure of God who is, according to Dionysius the Areopagite in *Mystical Theology*:

...neither soul nor mind; neither has He imagination nor opinion nor reason [*logos*] nor intuitive knowing [*noesis*]; neither is He reason nor intuition; neither can He be reasoned or intuited. He is neither life nor does He live; neither is He being [*ousia*] nor eternity [*aion*] nor time....He is neither oneness, nor deity, nor goodness. He is not spirit, as we understand [the term], nor sonship nor fatherhood....He is no one of the things which are not, nor any one of those which are...[thus] beyond affirmation...and beyond negation is the transcendence of Him Who, simply, is beyond all things and free.¹³

Because the topic of this thesis is ecstatic literature, which holds many qualities in common with mystical literature, it may be helpful to demarcate the different focus of each. To clarify, ecstatic literature may use apophatic themes and techniques that mystical literature also has

¹¹ Marguerite Porete, *The Mirror of Simple Souls*. J.C. Marler and Judith Grant (trs.). Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1999, p. ii.

¹² See <https://www.jeanne-darc.info/trial-of-condemnation-index/> for the trial of Jeanne d'Arc, 1431. Accessed 20th March 2019.

¹³ Alexander Golitzin quoting Dionysius in "Suddenly, Christ: The Place of Negative Theology in the Mystagogy of Dionysius Areopagites" in *Mystics – Presence and Aporia*. Kessler and Sheppard (eds.). Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2003, pp. 9-10.

recourse to, but where they diverge is that in the ecstatic work, the writer and reader are prepared to deal with notions of the non-existence of God, whereas in mystical literature the writing is inspired by a definite “knowing” of God, stronger than an *apologia* and a desire to communicate that experience and possibly the method of reaching such knowledge to others (see for example the writings of Teresa of Ávila). In ecstatic literature, such as this study investigates, God does not need to figure at all, or can make a cameo appearance that is ironic or ineffectual or many other interpretations according to the author’s taste. In mystical writing, there is a sense that it is earnestly dedicated to God, even while speaking of things that could be perceived as being quite jarring to the “average believer”.¹⁴

“Apophasis” means that state of being “in the negating position”. One might argue that it is being anti-any position at all in the current discourse situation, wanting to escape, in all meanings of the word – except death, for that stage is not necessary for ecstatic characters to attain in order to achieve an apophatic “reality”. Contrasted directly with “cataphatic”, apophatic describes qualities in a *negative* fashion, as opposed to a *positive* representation of the thing described. For instance, one could observe that the cataphatic qualities of God are, amongst others, God *is* omnipotent, omniscient, eternal. The apophatic qualities of God are perhaps more numerous (without form, without birth, not dying, not created, not made, not knowledge, not intuition and so forth). How does this speak to notions of excess and surplus in narrative representation? Through the utilisation of a negative or apophatic structure in description of a God-like trope, the limits of what can “be” in terms of the “be-ing-ness of God” are stretched indefinitely.

¹⁴ See for example Angela of Foligno’s Book in which she speaks of finding God in a state of apophasis, “When I am in that darkness I do not remember anything about anything human, or the God-man or anything that has a form. Nevertheless, I see all and I see nothing.” This stage is seen as a further advancement upon pious worship that is rather more straightforward and normative. The reader is also made aware that Angela was a married woman with five sons who, after months of fervent prayer, all passed away one after the other along with her husband. This left Angela “free” to continue to devote herself to the religious life. Paul Lachance (ed.). Angela of Foligno – Complete Works. New York: Paulist Press, 1993, p 205.

The possible understanding of the word “God” become manifold when listing the apophatic qualities of God. Whereas in a cataphatic description of the word God, one considers many adjectives and verbs that don’t seem somehow to fit, such as “all-loving”, or “all-knowing” or “all-goodness” because of a tone of naivety behind using these sort of terms. As a manner of speaking,¹⁵ it would appear that it is more natural to speak in an apophatic way when discussing notions of God, transcendence and the life to come. Apophasis is the preferred effect of the writing of ecstatic and mystic authors, able as it is to define through the refusal to define, and this study’s ecstatic focus lingers in such mystical epistemo-logics. The qualities of not-this associated with apophatic discourse include the ability to sit with notions of narrative silence, negation, the dark night of unknowing.¹⁶ This thesis makes an effort to sit with these notions both in its creative and critical writings.

It is also true that apophatic, or the noun form apophasis, is a term closely tied in with the visible and the invisible; apophasis is a state of being that is captured in ecstatic literature which can be interpreted as being a subversion of traditional ways of “seeing” as well as of being. In this sense apophasis is a kind of blindsight, a point this study returns to in the section on erasure or “X”. So if I am asserting that Bensmaïa’s work can be described as ecstatic, it should come as no great surprise that the figure of God is missing from the narrative. For Riding, “God” becomes Miss Banquett. For Bensmaïa “God” is agnostic absence. I suggest that in some ways, the function of God, in *The Year of Passages*, is taken over by the figure of Macha. It is important to note here, however, that the author does not merely replace God with a fictional character, as will be shown. The Deleuzean idea of the

¹⁵ Michel de Certeau writes about a distinct *modus loquendi* or ‘manner of speaking’ it is necessary to first understand before beginning to accurately comprehend mystical ideas in *The Mystic Fable*. Volume One. The sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. U.S. Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1992.

¹⁶ See for example, William Johnston, *The Mysticism of ‘The Cloud of Unknowing’*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2000. An excerpt from early in the text originally by Julian of Norwich defends apophatic knowledge of God, “And therefore St. Denis said, ‘The most godly knowing of God is that which is known through unknowing.’” *op. cit.* p 17.

“Body without Organs” could be applied here as God is, like the earth, a body without organs.

Ecstatic temporality revolves around itself in a new conception of time, treating events as eternally inevitable, in the mode of “the always already”. The reader of ecstatic and apophatic fiction might therefore not be surprised at the kind of impression the “always already” leaves upon them, namely, that of a certain kind of “dread” or uncanny feeling as the principal narrative unfolds. The apophatic way seems pitted with holes, into which a narrative could fall into a kind of theoretical impasse. How does ecstatic writing address notions of the unsayable, the un-narratable?

Ecstatic Techniques and Characteristics

Ecstatic writing does not only use apophasis as an anamorphic narrative lens; it also employs varying techniques in order to achieve the effect of *une sortie hors de soi*. Some of those techniques are: “designed waste”,¹⁷ “the always already”,¹⁸ aposiopesis, apostrophe, and the utilisation of the “laughter of despair”.¹⁹ Ecstatic writing will also explore such themes as Bataille’s “economies of expenditure”²⁰ in order to bring attention to the alternatives to realist narrative representation; in a similar way, economies of disintegration are evident in ecstatic writing (as opposed to cumulative action or causality). Compared to

¹⁷ ‘Designed waste’ is described by Laura Riding as a literary technique or more specifically, an approach to literature and to narrative in an ecological way, “the using up and ordering of itself”, writing, “The only productive design is designed waste. Designed creation results in nothing but the destruction of the designer: it is impossible to add to what is; all is and is made. Energy that attempts to make in the sense of making a numerical increase in the sum of made thing is spitefully returned to itself unused.” Quoted in ‘Creating Criticism’, *op. cit.*, pp xxi-xxii.

¹⁸ A certain dread is associated with ‘the always already’ which is examined in more detail. It is an apocalyptic treatment of temporality.

¹⁹ The delirious humour or ‘black humour’ of Bensmaïa is examined in this study. I suggest that it is a kind of coping mechanism for the disillusioned, a ‘mask of grief’.

²⁰ See Bataille’s work [The Accursed Share: an essay on General Economy, Vol. I and II](#). First published as [La Part Maudite](#) by Les Éditions de Minuit in 1949 (in French).

much realist and conventional literature, in ecstatic writing causality is replaced by ecstatic temporality, which revolves around the “ever-lasting present tense” and “the always already”. This study takes up and further explains each of these features in particular moments of analysis.

This thesis include a creative corpus of work as well as looking at the characteristics of ecstatic works by Laura Riding and Réda Bensmaïa in order to elucidate the aforementioned ecstatic techniques and apophatic areas of interest. Some of these characteristics are applicable to only one writer, so, for example, Riding is described as a “narrator of the nocturnal” and Bensmaïa has launched a creative interpretation of the Deleuzean “body without organs”.²¹ Though they are very different writers, they have both produced works that I have outlined as belonging to the ecstatic genre because of their proclivity toward expressing apophatic ideas in narrative. Ecstatic writing is, like Riding’s concept of “designed waste”, intent on “failing” – in the same way that Beckett has been credited with creating a “poetics of failure”. So too, ecstatic writing is different from mystical writing, although both employ apophatic modes and techniques. Similarly, the surrealist novel shares commonalities with ecstatic writing, Symbolist writing and theory in particular.²²

When Riding’s *Progress of Stories* and Bensmaïa’s *The Year of Passages* are set side by side they appear to be completely different to each other, one does not resemble the other. But as this study seeks to demonstrate, they can be grouped in and considered as ecstatic writing, which is an area of scholarship that is under-represented until fairly recently. While credit must be given to such titles as Cristina Mazzoni’s *Saint Hysteria* or Amy Hollywood’s

²¹ Deleuzean thought likens the earth itself to the BwO (Body without Organs).

²² The Salon de la Rose + Croix was a series of six art and music salons hosted by Joséphin Péladan in 1890s Paris. The Salon de la Rose + Croix grew out of Péladan’s Mystic Order of the Rose + Croix, a cultic religious movement that he established in Paris. The avant-garde Salon artists included many of the prominent Symbolist painters, writers, and music composers of the period.

Sensible Ecstasy, very little has been published on the topic of ecstatic literature, and this thesis aims to correct this imbalance.

Ecstatic writing is here illustrated by examining two twentieth-century authors but the project of grouping works into those that can be called ecstatic is a life-long one. To date, I consider many seemingly incongruent works to be ecstatic, such as William Blake's *The Book of Urizen*, Djuna Barnes' *Nightwood*, Flannery O'Connor's *The Violent Bear It Away* and the poetry of Arthur Rimbaud and Emily Dickinson, to name only a few. There is some evidence of interest in the phenomenon of ecstasy in a medical treatment setting, and this study has had recourse to medical journal articles and databases in order to be aware of the current climate in its attitudes toward encountering ecstasy in society. Of particular concern to me were the dubious practices of Jean-Marie Charcot in his treatment of young women in his care.²³ I had hoped that this analysis would include an in-depth critical section on the ecstatic feminine but that proved to be beyond the scope of the critical part of the project. Instead, I focus on the idea of exile and escape as being akin to a modern-day ecstatic experience, examined by both Riding and Bensmaïa, although in very different ways. As will be described, I also identify a kind of delirious humour throughout Bensmaïa's work, related to an ecstatic aesthetic which is of a kind of "laughing despair". Louis-Ferdinand Céline was an early forerunner to the utilisation of this style, ecstatic because it is constantly faltering, faltering because it is constantly experiencing a highly-wrought sensibility where everything acts upon the narrator, everything upsets and alienates (him).

In true apophatic fashion then, the last word should be given on what ecstatic writing is *not*. It is not a description of the experience of extreme happiness. It is not erotica. It is not

²³ See Georges Didi-Huberman. *Invention of Hysteria – Charcot and the Photographic Iconography of the Salpêtrière*. Alisa Hartz (tr.). Originally published in 1982 by Éditions Macula, Paris. This translation published by Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 2003.

concerned with what happens in the story-plot overall. It is not one particular style or theme. Ecstatic writing is a term used to describe work whose manifestations are non-normative, especially strange and unexpected swerves that unsettle even the text's own apparatuses. The ecstatic work will humbly concern itself with enacting its own disappearance and the reader will have to be well-equipped to catch it and identify it before it vanishes from sight.

Catharine in Thirds

“All our writing...would be this: the anxious search for what was never written in the present, but in a past to come.”²⁴

I will expiate nothing.

Some part of this story has already been told in the instance of when Matteo met so called Pia.

[Did he really 'meet'? She screamed in his face and disappeared].

Hu-ush. Because of this chance event, now comes the first story, a young priest called Paul-Francis.

[Matteo a man does not exist except elsewhere or in public observance. When? When he is in the confessional as well as when he conducts ceremonial rites].

Ceremonial rites, Benedictus, No-ce Dommm...no Corinth, Isiah, Nahum 1:5. Not 'in pace' da pace domine.

NOUNS.

Nouns? No way. I have learnt my piece and –

²⁴ Maurice Blanchot, *The Step Not Beyond*. Lycette Nelson (tr.). New York: State University of New York Press, 1992, p xiv.

NOT YET!

DO THEY LOOK TURNED ON TO YOU? A few thoughts on nominee and Baha, the cheekiness of language written is what swirls around in the mind and body when certain words are mentioned.²⁵

‘Ceremonial rites’ gives way to ‘last rites’. The word ‘death’ evokes ‘eschatology’ in the final defence of life =NOUN> .

‘Eschatological’ is a logic which cannot be easily rebuffed. The time of *the end of days* transmogrifies individuals into a world-community armed to the chattering teeth with fear or courage. At that moment, no one has been more alive <debatable .

It is the binding together in the face of impending oblivion that achieves this feeling.

Individual longing for oblivion is a different topic.

Encompassed within is an unbearable restlessness, an absence of innocent energy – possibly the concomitant effect of *ennui*. Highly evolved nonwisdom has no argument with suicide, no judgment at all. Suicide – done. Confession.

Going to the confessional requires a similar approach to the reading aloud from the book – an approach of humility. The difference is that between shame and pride.

Chant in answer, S.A.T.B.. Read aloud.

Hu-ushed. The reading? Present participle, I’ll take it! The reading aloud from the book is not at all similar to the psalms,

Why? which are the expansion of thought begun by the priest and finished by the congregation noun because the reading aloud from the book noun is done by an individual, an especially chosen individual who is not the priest but must be listened to.

Name?

²⁵ Give the mike to the disingenuous and stop looking at them in the eye!

Yes?

The similarity between the reading aloud from the book to the psalms, is that the first is a monologue followed by unanimous agreement and the second is a kind of conversation. Conversation. Conversation?

Is it or is it not a reciprocal speaking exercise?

Fuuuh! What has Nineveh to do with Proverbs? *Vivre non livre*, heard of that advice? I have something to say here about –

- The whole psalm can be known in its entirety with practise, death.

Death? Morbidity. You!

<>

Mort nominee?

What.

When I say ‘death’ I do mean ‘absence of consciousness’. You subtle nonclever ones know this.

“Do I really need to explain?”

Fu-uck yes.

You do.

If something has an end which is anticipated and desired before beginning, it results in an aggrandizing not-quite death, but a part of it, and not a beautiful part.

All things have to end.²⁶ All things? Surely not. Palmer, *end* having to have things, will you?

If something has an end which is hoped for in consciousness and expressed in language when beginning it, that thing can be an opportunity or a flirtation, or a kind of conversation, but not a child or a bloody animal²⁷ for god’s sake! – Kids of any kind have the potential to be despoiled by knowledge of death.

That is, they are, by their nature, too deserving of love to know the fear of separation.

²⁶ Proverbial: leave while you’re still having a good time.

²⁷ For example, monkeys, dogs, dolphins, elephants. I have no authority to say this.

They try to guess at it. {"Mama?"} Not funny. Do you agree?

Consciousness and language? Well! Thank you for the floor. Ahem. It matters not what epoch, if there is spoken remorse, there must be a reply. Anything else would be a prayer. Anything else would be a one-way conversation with god the demiurge, the flapping tongue of endless languages, the scatter-brained giant who must exert itself and create and sleep and then so cannot reply to all people at all times! One of the books that is, sadly, not allowed to be read aloud, it is not = 0, is not meant for this purpose, defines existence as "motion and rest".²⁸

<One of the books? Where are the others? Party of one?<not=2 how dull Human beings are social beings. That is what Diderot has told us²⁹ and I believe him.

There is a gathering in the church < > There is a party of unpopular people sitting in the church on pews. I'm doing well with things now! If there is piety on a face reading aloud which faces the people, if the whole face is repeating aloud the trace of words that leave deep schisms that cannot be made smooth, there must be a unanimous reply on the part of the crowd. One addresses the many who agree before they understand.

Now, even though the following is *addressed* to hell with it, let's get personal! Now now. I am stating all this profundity as facts in order to increase the urge in listeners, in readers, to disagree. Perhaps someone will lurch out of this page and attack its content with their own opinion, which I should like very much. All this talk, all these confident opinions lead us back to meet Paul-Francis.

Dear Paul-Francis, I just can't stand light conversation! But, Paul-Francis I so want to perform it properly one day, that's why I spend *so* much time on it. Let's be straight, I'm

²⁸ Saying of Jesus attributed in the Gospel of Thomas (50): Jesus said, "If they say to you, 'Where have you come from?' say to them, 'We have come from the light, from the place where the light came into being by itself, established [itself], and appeared in their image.' If they say to you, 'Is it you?' say, 'We are its children, and we are the chosen of the living Father.' If they ask you, 'What is the evidence of your Father in you?' say to them, 'It is motion and rest.'" The Gnostic Society Library, the Nag Hammadi Library. The Gospel of Thomas. Trans. Stephen Patterson and Marvin Meyer. Source: <http://gnosis.org/naghamm/gosthom.html>. Accessed 08/02/2016.

²⁹ See for example, Diderot's novel *The Nun*, in which he attacks the ideology and construction of the convent, the cloister, the monastery – any segregation of men and women in an institution that disregards the physiological and the psychological "health". Diderot was notably concerned with the mind-body dichotomy. Denis Diderot, The Nun. Translated with an introduction by Leonard Tancock. Middlesex, England: Penguin Books Ltd., 1972.

getting good at it. I will speak off a script which I have never seen and my face won't give me away, even. The now is so amenable to everything, enchanté.

[Jean-Jacques Amens that/ Fyodor as well if gives I some it's his fault for writing heart. But I dissemble. The serpent saw. The serpent put the page in front of its bloodless face and saw. I don't have feelings for people who don't make me angry. The ones who don't make me laugh can go jump too (as I to them).³⁰ Truth? Fuuuck! She asks an untold number of questions so that they may answer. This technique saves an individual from attack. Attack? Talk about Persecution Complex!

Pop it open pop it down pop it out and pop yourself some popping-tots 1derful Ones

{one is equal to one so stop comparing my-selves to two.

Is two love?}

Top marks to me then, for having such an overflowing bag of enquiries! From polite banality to highly personal probity, I can get you as naked as you want to get. I have seen you naked and admired you, we become friends, we have a little orgasm together, we have a sensible connection that brings relief. TWO NOUNS ARE BETTER THAN NONE BUT NOT 'ONE' IF YOU DON'T MIND. leave me alone! **And then?**

Just please excuse me J'accuse Zsa-q's if I cannot remember all of your answers and all of the names you mention. **All of your nouns I cannot remember** that's why when I see you I have to address you by your name, it calms me down a bit.

Doesn't this quirk of mine make you feel individual?

³⁰ Addendum: "I have seen a cultivated orange tree at Pramousquier, on Cap Nègre, lose its head. It was living in sunshine. A palm threw shade on it. This shade terrified it. One the four branches shaded by the palm it put out long thorns....I can assure you that this orange tree did not laugh and that, even when delivered from the suspect shade, it had no desire to laugh." Jean Cocteau, The Difficulty of Being. Elizabeth Sprigge (tr.). New York: Melville House Publishing, 1966.

Good.

(Distance makes the heart grow fonder)

"Can *someone, anyone,* ask *me* some questions for a change?
Feign interest, come on, keep going, it's only polite to make
the false extrovert collapse even if it *is* in fits and starts.
Encourage the introvert! Ask them something, for god's sake!

If you hesitate to talk your truth, like I do, you can imagine
what untold agonies of longing you stir in me" {FAKE} and **in this**
way, I am the same as the penitent, I am the same as the congregation. I just make more effort
is all, hatefulness in the place of budding love results.

i

As far as humanism is concerned, at least the outcome that I
achieve is to increase the other to the status of Messiah, as
though *i* were asking them. Is this really so despicable?

No, because this is not the worst. I -

If someone is as I have made them, if *i* have already made them
laugh **how I make them in my image** it's only hurt itself! No one else
is all I'm saying. One and that was all my saying. That's my
son, the son of Mary, clete it all together?

An unfair thing to do!

LET'S GO, IT'S GRANDMA'S WEDDING

REEEEEEEE POOORT REEEEEEEEEE POOOOOOORT

"An outsider might say that I have a satisfactory amount of
trauma to my personal history. Not too much, and not too
little." Take up again your traumas and the desire to make
half. Take up again this clasp and hell your bony carse.
What's this *is* and it ALSO *is* there was my mind dress
despoiled. This dress was white my life. Flex eaten, it also
is.. that awning, the front despoiled you know there that I
live. I live in a grand old city. Yes the facing sheath has

age, wait and grow to nine gold age. What's your age 314?
Unspoilt crack it clack it fall and crack me up what's gone
'word up' What is 'wonder' too much front? she'll make us fit
go come! get down and scoop it off, scoop up night time's
gurgle head! please I'm bleeding I won't fend, bending over
let's pray red, pull her up she'll use it up, no matter what's
this 'up' He'll clean it like it comes, this is was is a love.
He'll take it as it is.

He'll heal it just like fun.

He will He will He will?

IF

If there have been false popes (contenders), if there have
been wars and cities constructions, if there have been

historical events to
be learnt by heart when all there really is, is human nature, human, nature, human nature then
pleat returns it! *turns* to treat? or gives soul gash to eat? or turns back to retreat? NO.

I am Paul-Francis.

Paul-Francis etiolated.

Jesus died. Jesus.

Plucken. Died!

These Tawdry Ceremonies

Marion and I hadn't seen each other for twelve years. A neighbour who I spent a lot of time with hunted down her details for me. I didn't like my neighbour but I liked talking about my past. At the time I got re-connected with Marion I talked to her a lot about our idyllic friendship; I think that I even said that living without Marion's smile was like burying my mother every damned day. Within a week I had Marion's contact details. I got drunk again that afternoon and emailed her, taking care to assume an up-beat tone. To my surprise, she agreed to meet me. On the chosen day I woke unnaturally early, my heart all flippant and desperate.

At school we had been resentful best friends. She didn't need me at all, except when she was happy. I was attached to her eloquent dismissal of everything petty as I was a timid girl and easily thrilled by impatience. And yet I was also embarrassed of her, because of her size. It was my second day at high school, at morning interval. I dreaded the bell ringing. In class everything was contained, the teacher talked, some naughty girls were scolded, the odd sparrow flew past the window in an anxious rush of energy. But just as I was feeling comfortable the wall clock showed a few minutes til the hour. My biology teacher was sitting on the edge of his desk as he finished his lecture. His sexuality worried me.

The bell rang and girls around me jumped up as one being. They seemed so comfortable together. I walked behind the groups of girls with a tentative smile on my face thinking about running away when out of the trees near the chapel came the hulking form of Marion, ambling toward me like a supercilious bear. She asked me if this was the way to the science labs.

"What class?" I asked her.

She looked down at her diary. "Bio." Her voice was croaky and warm.

"We've just come out of Bio," I said, "You missed it."

"Well then," Marion said, her blue eyes dancing, "I'm gonna have something to eat, I'm starving. You?"

Physically, Marion was a freak. At thirteen years of age she was pushing six feet in height. Her girth, easily eighty centimetres in circumference made the prestigious claret uniform with its thin belt appear meagre. Even her hair, an exploding set of curls of a non-descript brown was big. Her nose was big. Within a few minutes of speaking to her you would know that she also had a big healthy heart, had enthusiasm, ebullience. Even though these qualities were not high on the list of the average city girl who went to our school they could still sense that they were present within her and so they could afford her a subtle respect. Even though they would never accept Marion, they couldn't loath her, as they did me. They were mesmerized and delighted by Marion.

When I first started at the school I thought that I was going to be friends with them. I was pretty, with dark hair and rosy cheeks, I had a slim figure and I liked art and tennis. But I was nervous and I was old. I wanted to lean on Marion and be reprimanded by her but I also wanted her to look after me and make me laugh and be confidential with me. With her

voluminous chatter next to me I didn't have to combat the vagueness that I felt both internally and externally, a vagueness both threatening and impenetrable.

At the end of the school week I had walked the short distance to Marion's house after school. It was winter, and her mother baked chocolate chip cookies every afternoon. Somehow my father had discovered that I would buy sweets from the tuck-shop at school with my allowance. He had no such spies at the Betts' house. When I was there I could almost believe that this was my real home, *my* mother's sweaty rotund face turned away from me as she squinted at the swelling cookies, *my* awkward feminine father, *my* alert blue budgie pecking around the bottom of his cage. Her parents were instantly comfortable with me and treated me with both affection and respect. I was as ashamed of them as I was of Marion, as they were poor and outspoken but when I was in their house I became chatty and light-hearted because I was grateful to them for being insignificant people who loved me.

Perhaps it was this intensely narcissistic streak in me that so repulsed Marion. Mutual self-loathing kept us together but something happened to Marion to give her the clarity to be able to see me as I really was, a mere lonely soul, the worst kind of friend. Within a year of us meeting she had gotten into St. Clair's on a musical scholarship and in addition to sitting grade five on both the violin and the cello she took up the tuba, and was often away in the evenings at music practice. Preferring her humble home with its vegetable patch and its multi-colored carpet to the silence of my own almost stately residence, I would have dinner with her parents, waiting for her to come home. I would chat happily with them but in between my patter of criticism and cued laughter I would have to rush to the bathroom to stare at myself. Sometimes it would get to nine o'clock and she still wouldn't have come home and Patty would have to take me back to my house. On those nights I would find it difficult to get to sleep, anticipating her excitement the next day, of having found a new companion, a girl who played the trumpet and the drums, a girl with a big and beautiful head, a girl who could never smile with their glasses perched on their nose, keeping people at a perennially strange distance.

The waitress came over to us with a plunger of coffee in her hands. She had very dry hair and an importunate manner when asking us if we would like more coffee. I imagined myself as a man and knew that I would find her attractive because she was filthy, with acne on her chest and an emaciated under-nourished body. I had chosen this back-street café to meet again because I had abandoned my glasses long ago and only ever went to places that were near to where I lived. Our reunion conversation had stumbled around the pleasantries. I was longing to impress her, to disrupt her stoic expression.

"So, are you in love?" I smiled at her. "Tell me about your love life."

Marion blinked. She took my question seriously, like an insult.

"I'm not seeing anyone. I'm too busy."

Flicking a long curly strand of hair behind her shoulder she casually stared at the empty café. It was the same attitude I saw in her on the day I found her diary. Patty was at the parent-teacher interviews, Marion was at a marching band rehearsal and I was left to prepare dinner with Marion's father, Neil. He was happy to have his chance at cooking food as Patty wouldn't

let anyone in her kitchen after five thirty at night. He was happily pouring spices into the wok of bubbling oil and garlic, moving his hips to some invisible music and telling me about the first night he and Patty had met. The strong aromas made grotesque his animated expressions as I stared at the white segments of garlic burning, the clay-colored pieces of flesh hardening, his thin parsimonious lips forming words about debonair young men darting after women in canary yellow dresses.

I imagined Marion laughing with a sweet French girl called Yvette who played piano like a jazz genius as the talk flowed from her father about meeting Patty in a park and picking her luscious gardenias that she still had today because dear Patty bless her heart had dried them and used them as bookmarks and isn't that just what young love can do for you. Out of politeness I made surprised faces and tried to smile when, unable to walk away, I fell over. Neil was shocked. He helped me to my feet and suggested that I have a glass of water and a little rest for a while.

Marion's bedroom was more familiar to me than my own room. I wandered around for a while, aimlessly looking for something to be surprised about.

Marion cleared her throat and looked at me with malice.

"You were a thousand worlds away, Pieta," she said carefully. It was the first time that she had said my name since she sat down. I felt ashamed.

"Sorry about that," I laughed, "I was just remembering all of the fun we used to have at school."

The waitress came up to us offering more coffee. I put out my cup. Marion politely declined.

"I've got to go," she said, "I have another appointment in half an hour."

I could blunt myself emotionally at short notice and was about to enquire politely about her appointment when she abruptly stood up.

"It's been disappointing seeing you again," she said simply. She saw something in my face which made her hesitate. Paucity? Sorrow? "Don't tell me you're still thinking about that diary crap," she said loudly.

"Are you girls all right in there? I've heated some apple pie if anyone's hungry."

The sound of Patty hovering outside the door, the floorboards creaking under her weight...I was fifteen again.

I looked up at Marion. She was standing there impatiently, arms folded against her chest. A thread of forest-green mohair stuck to her upper lip. Nearby a diner dropped their cutlery on the floor. I smirked as Marion's breasts shook slightly. "See you again sometime, mate," I said. She threw a couple of coins on the table, swept herself up into her forest-green scarf and glided past me. I sat there, joyous. Amused by the ceaseless turning and gliding of hulking ships and lightweight canoes passing each other in tawdry ceremonies. It was better to be alone, but better than what I didn't know nor did I care. I looked around the café, searching

lazily for an easy loving scene and found instead a withered woman wiping the slack mouth of her yellow-skinned infant with a steel spoon.

By the window two teenagers giggled and kissed, furtive to feel each other's crotch. Directly in front of me a Chinese man sat suspended in memories, tapping his pen in front of him with a frightened smile, a Sunday afternoon recurring. It was inevitable that I would see Marion again. The tinkle of a postman's bell sounded behind me and two elderly women dressed for the matinee in white stockings and brown platform shoes clip-clopped their way across the floor with regal poise as the ravenous woman with the bleached hair gripped tightly onto her coffee plunger, utterly focused on the newly arrived customers.

The Serving Woman

The site where the singing nuns lived contained two limestone rocks towering over the natural shrubs that grew there and a carefully tended garden. The convent was famous throughout the country on the strength of its choir, which released recordings every year. The environment was reflected in a still lake that inversely mirrored the scene – hints of horizontal lines appearing in the water indicated original over copy. The buildings of rock were large enough to house a hundred nuns, and larger than buildings that were enough to house a hundred nuns. One rock was at least fifty meters taller than its companion. It was sinewy and slim and was lightened by the sunset, its east wing in sensuous shadow. The other rock was squat and motionless. Because of the knobby forms on top of its head, and a white slit where the mouth would feasibly be, the rock resembled a monk pulling his cape around him. The other, squat and broad-faced, looked like a frog. The rocky formations were known by the nuns of the convent as the Monk and the Frog.

Now we who are acquainted with the doings and the non-doings of monks know that this frog building could not be a monk of any stature because it was fat and also because it gave the impression of being cold, an impossible possibility that could not be allowed. But as it was, the frog rock was able to be penetrated from the top of its head, allowing spaces for living in and spaces for staircases to be built. A bridge linked the frog's right eye to the tall and slender rock of the monk rock, which held a shrine to the black Madonna that the nuns would pray to.

It was the Mother Superior's task to punish her charges by sending them one by one to the shrine of the black Madonna, where they would have to maintain a complete silence for as long as the Mother Superior dictated. Because this formidable woman was otherwise engaged in studying the scriptures, transposing scores and conducting the nun's choir, she of course did not have the leisure to sit at the bottom of the staircase, listening carefully to the penitents' silences. Instead, small sparrows that were barely out of infancy would be kept

on a shelf by offerings of pieces of grain and seeds. There were always five of these sparrows skirting the shrine who, although engaged in filling their small bellies, smarted and flew away at any human voice. The Mother Superior kept the sparrows in a state of near-starvation in a locked room next to her own, near to the staircase. The nuns had no idea of how many cages of birds there were, only that there was an inexhaustible supply of them and they all had a highly developed sense of smell for grains and seeds.

On the rare occasion when one of the novices would rebel, refusing to work in the garden or wash the nun's habits in the lake, the Mother Superior would leave the penitent in the shrine overnight for as many nights as she wished, with white bread and a tiny amount of water, leaving her recourse to plaintive humming and rigorous silent prayer, interposed with her own thoughts, leading finally to a sleep of anxiety. When the punished nun would finally be allowed to return to the music hall, she would of course have an unbecoming croak to her voice, and dismissed to a menial task until the nuns returned for lunch or for dinner as the case may be. Naturally the penitent was shunned for a few days by the others who would spontaneously harmonise wherever they went, their confident voices reaching up to the black Madonna and higher by virtue of one of their kind being reduced to misery and isolation.

Several of the penitents who could not survive a self-pity combined with almost unanimous rejection by the group would quickly become what can only be termed as psychologically unstable. This unfortunate state was not ameliorated by a show of kindness or conversation but intensified to an irritable and paranoid confusion as to whether the convent was holy or unholy, whether the Mother Superior was a giant sparrow disguised as a woman, whether the songs, psalms and carols formerly so much loved were not in fact invocations to some insidious force. These women would rebel quite without meaning to, sometimes even striking other nuns across the face (usually a first soprano) and be dragged by the ear to the shrine by a number of friends of the stricken soprano, bounced and scraped by the multiple steps and staircases until the rebel would grudgingly rise to her feet and run to the shrine herself. Her persecutors could not enter because they of course could not

switch from gleeful hooting violence to humble prayer in front of the Black Madonna, their hearts would be beating too fast and their loud breathing would disturb the tell-tale sparrows so they would run down the stairs again and into one of the music rooms, still breathless and giggling.

The solitary nun would sometimes brush away some of the grains and seeds, take one final backwards glance at the statue, and, swearing at the top of her voice, would throw herself from the sparrows' shelf, landing on jagged rocks. None ever survived this independent gesture of protest. The Mother Superior considered herself to be a kind of python charmed by sweet song. She therefore had little ability to be able to perceive a potential rebel. Suicide was a highly probable possibility, statistically speaking. And such scandal was unwelcome so the Mother Superior had little option but to order the burial of the pathetic mangled bodies as deterrent to the others not to try to ascend the order of their station. Just as soprano, alto, tenor, bass was eternal and immutable, so more women would come to audition to be in her choir, and under her pastoral care, which needless to say, left a lot to be desired.

The Mother used cellists to imitate the bass. After almost two years had passed, the python felt as though all of the eagles were now clipped of their wings. Subsequently, she had no one at which to hiss, no one to carry out the menial tasks required to keep her in food and song. When a thirty-something year-old woman approached the rocks, holding a letter in a child's hand-writing, asking for shelter and promising to carry out any job required of her in return, the Mother Superior's eyes glinted. "You are in fact dumb, speechless, my girl?" The woman nodded yes. "Then you will start for me this instant, after I of course show you to your room and you can even have a shower and a quick meal here before you commence the duties required of our serving staff."

The woman nodded, smiling happily and the Mother Superior took her by the arm and lead her to the servants' quarters, a two-storied building next to the church which was between the staff and the convent.



Many miles away in the sprawling metropolis of Paris, a meeting of the most senior and high-ranking bishops was almost at its apex. Gathered together at a long table in the town's most magnificent cathedral, Matteo (also known as *Matteo Serratus 'the saw-toothed'*) sat at the head of this table and rapped a silver knife against his wine glass, quieting the debating bishops.

Strangely, all present were trapped by the magic rectangle of the long table and could not leave. Their faces deep red with righteous anger, more men would be on their feet than sitting, and the few seated bishops present would be scowling and also redfaced, for these ones were quite old and they deeply resented the lack of respect indicated by the unpredictable and rather frightening behavior of the younger bishops. The old bishops were rightly afraid but their pitiable positions were not taken into account.

Matteo Serratus was coldly and tacitly staring at the massive Jesus-less cross placed high on the wall. He had previously decided the outcome of the argument in question, and withstood the dreadful bellowing around him as though in a trance. At the point when some of the men remembered his existence and began pointing at him while shouting in the nearest face, when some of the men had sat down in a huff, crossing their arms and tightening their thin lips, Matteo spoke sharply, saying, "Thus being spoken on this day eleventh January 1432 anno domini, as speaker for the Roman chapter of the Holy Roman Catholic Church, set down that the Church Eternal condemns and denies the representatives of the prelates of the Church Militant in sentencing Jeanne d'Arc to death."

The other men immediately began arguing. Some stood up and shook their fists, while others sat still, looking wary and depressed. This business of the maiden had various factions within the church raging, she who had pretended to be a man and who had led France's army to victory...only then to be captured and sentenced to death was problematic. There was her bravery, her audacity and of course the fact that she claimed to be party to

“voices”, and “visitations” from the saints Margaret and Catherine that had made her a public figure, and her death a disgrace. Matteo had gone to Paris to attend the public trial and he was greatly disturbed. For the woman was clearly of sound mind and he did not understand why her character was being called into question. In any case, in his opinion, it was an instance where the Church Eternal could not stand idly by.



The Mother Superior of the singing nuns was well pleased with her new serving woman. At first she gave her only light duties so that she might not run away. These daily duties consisted of scrubbing one hundred and twenty potatoes, setting the ten tables for breakfast, lunch and dinner and helping the cook clear the plates once the nuns had left the room.

She had no compunction in allowing the serving woman to be in such close proximity to the only male employed at the convent, for the woman was not only plain and dumb but also so shy that she never looked at any person straightforwardly, preferring to look downwards, and she covered her (rather silky) blonde hair with an old blue cloth that had been a duster for the grand piano but graciously given her by the Mother Superior so that she might not get salty sweat in her eyes (or give the unpleasant cook a chance to fall in love with her hair and her demure nature).

The serving woman's weekly duty was to iron the nun's habits. When this was accomplished in half the time three rebels would take to perform the same task, the delighted Mother Superior deigned to give her woman her own bedsheets to wash and iron, which were, of course, a much finer heavier quality than those of the other nuns and so must never be seen or talked about. The Mother Superior shook her head at memories of herself furtively washing those sheets in the middle of the night. For what other sheets could be expected on her four-poster bed covered in a satin auburn featherdown?

The name the serving woman was baptised with was Anne-Colette Zenilo. Anne-Colette had grown up in a small town by the sea on the eastern coast, daughter to a coalmine worker and a laundress. The mother of Anne-Colette was known locally as Lil Nippa for she was not only very short but she was also born with an ordinary right hand and a left hand that had two fingers and a thumb, that is to say, four fingers and a thumb but the fingers had fused together so tight that no knife should part them and never had. She was exceedingly deft with this pink-skinned claw, it was pink because it was always warm from working; either pulling starched collars straight for the iron, or separating wet garments that were twisted up together. It also acted as a moving spool for weaving, and so helped to keep the family in food and shelter.

When Anne-Colette was born, her mother and father held a large celebration – that is to say with eight guests as well as themselves, now a family of three. The guests were sorely disappointed to peer into the cot and see a baby girl with five tiny fingers on each hand and five tiny toes on each foot. For such a party, which included beer, dinner *and* dessert would customarily be held in honour of a first-born son, a son which by rights should have at least lacked webbing on its left hand, a sixth toe, or some other defect so that one of the men could pronounce his nickname on the spot. The men were greatly looking forward to being the first one to hit on the right jovial nickname to welcome the baby to the community and make him one of their own.

Their wives sensed their anticipation and each cherished the desire that it would be their man who was the wittiest of the bunch, and so destined for greater things than the coal mine, the slaughterhouse or the miserable fishing boats that brought up yields of little more than a few sour cat-fish and lettuce weed – yet the fishermen were determined to prove correct the legend that sharks and tonnes of snapper swarmed the waters as well as the elusive rainbow fish (having swum all the way from China) which jumped happily even in the sizzling buttery saucepan and had the most delicate taste and texture that could only be tasted in the imagination.

Lil Nippa and her husband were so proud of their perfectly formed baby that they paid the neighbourhood boys the equivalent of a week's worth of a coalman's washing of his overalls (translate that amount into bottles of beer for the naughty fellows). Their unruly explosive invention consisting of potatoes, tubes, candles and some substance which in the future would be referred to as gun-powder but for Anne-Colette's birth this substance had no name, and the wily boys refused to describe its contents.

After the generous supper and cake for dessert, Anne-Colette's father made an excited announcement that they would all now go outside for a show. Lil Nippa cradled her daughter's feet with her pink hand and held her tight to her bosom, her right hand supporting the baby's head and tiny torso.

Her husband bent down to where he had placed the mysterious objects that would certainly be the talk of the town for years to come. He lit the wicks in order, from longest to shortest

and ran back to join the group of guests gathered in the small garden.

The people were mightily surprised when a series of great booms, cracking sticks and pieces of potato went flying into the air and gave off coloured sparks of green, yellow and orange. Suffice to say, the most shocked of the company was baby Anne-Colette, who henceforth never spoke a word in her life.

3

Matteo Serratus wished to be alone. He was very upset that there was dissent amongst the men today over the fate of the innocent young woman Jeanne. After reading a transcript of her trial taken by one of his friends who happened to be present he thought one thing was clear: that the woman was innocent and that her spiritual experiences were very much authentic. Whether Catherine and Margaret appeared to her, he could not confirm, but he thought it a most likely occurrence, considering his own intense spiritual experiences. He dismissed his domestics and descended through the cloisters to the Throne Room, where he would be interrupted only by the Pope. He wanted merely to reminisce while there was

still time before an undeniable fissure would occur throughout their churches. Matteo ascended the five stone steps and seated himself down on the Emperor's cedar-wood throne. He let his arms fall into the curved arm-rests and let his head relax so that the magnificent domed ceiling would encompass his vision. He knew well the images of the saints and martyrs that were painted there, and was cheered by the illumination of the top of the octagonal dome through the east-facing stained glassed windows. The gentle gold colour reminded him of another time, of another self, an impertinent boy who cared little for the wishes of his mother and father as to what kind of man he would become.

Jeanne, or the Maid, was on his mind. Her face would be beatified one day, that thought was comfort for his troubled heart. His parents' faces came before him, like in a dream as he turned toward the light that was coming through the east windows. Both his mother and father would side with him over Jeanne's innocence.

He thought that his mother and father together formed a particular combination that gave them the advantage of 'double sight' which resulted in the same decision for their son's future. He never once saw his parents argue, over his care or any other matter. Mother saw the strength of his idealistic character which was sometimes mistaken for sceptical arrogance, and she also sensed the gentle lover in him, which made her sorrow for the daughter-in-law who could never be, the dark-haired children she would not hold in her arms. Father's sight of his son was, like all else he apprehended, reversed inward so that his own prejudices, beliefs, judgements and moral code reflected his own impeccable manliness and surety of purpose. In this way, Father had never pronounced ignorance on any topic under the sun and he chose a wife who was discreetly malleable to his irrefutable opinions. He was not given to reminiscence but when it came to his family, he could throw himself backward as well as forward. In the forward-facing life, things tended to become more vague the more one learnt, but still obvious once he had applied his pragmatic system of elimination. When he threw himself backward, he would be very present in the memory, just as in his waking life, he would be sharp-eyed and confident, for he saw reality as no surprise, containing no threats to himself, his wife, or his son. Tenderness was more a part of him

when his sense of being was catapulted to the past, and he remembered many incidents that occurred when his son was very young that confirmed to him that his son's future vocation was to be a priest.

The first of these was that the kid was reciting his Our Fathers and Hail Marys at three years of age. He caught a glimpse of this when he saw his son and his wife praying before she put him to sleep. The rest were a little tedious to recount: his singing school hymns to himself, joyous, his habit of picking up stray injured cats and secretively healing them, the birds who would calmly sit on his shoulder, the way he always seemed to do the right thing. He was simply too ambivalent, too dreamy and naïve to be a doctor, too honest to be a merchant. It was obvious to him that if his son should ever have a hope of stopping being his son and become his own man, he would have to be a man of God, a man of the cloth.

Occasionally Mother would feel herself to be so closely attuned to her husband's inward view and refusal of anything beyond it (which may be everything beyond it, a terrifying vacancy of not-knowing) that she would merge her silence into his mind and say things that he would say, phrases and opinions inappropriate to her own personality, which made her friends smart in embarrassment but they knew that she couldn't help becoming her husband from time to time.

In actual fact, she didn't quite merge her mind into his, but covered it like a skin. Many times, in the early and middle stages of her marriage, she would say to herself while looking into her husband's red and itchy-looking eyes, 'You are you and I am myself. You are yourself and I am...' but here she would hurry away from her mind and absorb herself in house-work for she knew not how to define or deny any quality about herself, only a comforting proverb for these existential impasses... *'It will all turn out fine'*.

One day Matteo was out rowing on the lake near to his parents' home. He was coming up for sixteen years of age and he knew that he must choose how he would make a living for himself. This irked him.

How, he questioned, was he able to provide for his own needs when he didn't respect respectability? He rowed on the lake as many times as he could and he wrote poems, scraps of poems and ideas for no other reason than it felt right, even manly, as though he were taking himself and his body seriously.

For he was an athletic young man and had finely shaped, strong hands, and unusually sensitive fingertips. He played the cello and he wrote poems and stories. When he wrote, he could feel something proud flowing out from his chest and hands and imperceptibly back into his fingers via his delicate fingertips, replenishing itself. Needless to say, his first attempts at poetry were unpretentious and fragile, exactly the right ingredients for a budding poet - just as the smoky lake would be everywhere but where he was in the moment of being there, cutting through the soft water with his oars.

The lake was the poem and he was the anomaly. He was the otherness and the poem required something different from itself to be drawn down to earth by words. Yet the poem intended to evoke the origins of all things. Earth's plates grinded against one another and seas were created, villages and people destroyed. Lakes were craters filled with water from the clouds. A bud rose from the earth to form water to form mist and all of these things had materiality forever and never, whereas how long was he to last and what was the use? In this way, the boy was a little too precocious for his own good.

Matteo realized that he had a desire to leave the place and return to his study, where he would find old copies of poetry that he had written from nine years of age.

When he was fourteen he wrote the following poem. Needless to say, he received a thorough beating from the friars for distributing it amongst his friends.

*The young man steps into the light
Luminous, he closes his eyes
The young woman trails her foot in the water
She has not felt shy before
She always feels shy around him*

*They clasp each other, their groins press against one another
The spray from the waterfall fills their kisses with water
She ducks her head, the kisses are too fiery
The young man lifts her face toward his*

*Questioning her with his eyes
This love has always existed
This love is always beyond language
It embraces the entirety of existence
It is a grave delusion*

*Romantic love is the curse of humankind
Men and women have been martyred for saying much less
Nature ceaselessly reproduces
Curse the nature that created man so womanly!
Curse the poor bastard who is born again and again under the sun!*

*Women, pack up your dreams of romantic love
Women, meditate on death, not on motherhood!
In this way you will better serve the orphans
Who over-run the earth!*

In his youth he had a reputation for having a rather too-sharp wit, a caustic bent that humiliated his enemies and would be his defining characteristic. The boy had no argument against his father, only a perturbation that the old man didn't have enough imagination to realise the possibilities that lay ahead for his son.

Matteo suddenly heard a lovely voice singing woefully on the bank. He ignored it at first as if an audience watched him, but it didn't take long before he turned his boat around to row nonchalantly to the bank and see for himself the owner of that dulcet lament.

What he saw was a dark-haired girl, her hair dripping water down the front and the back of her funereal dress. She was hunched over until she could touch the water, she was making whirlpools in the water and tears were streaked down her lovely face.

Matteo called out a 'hello' to her which was partly in his voice but seemed to stream out from his chest. The dirge in the calm thick air was his compassion deflected and it hurt him terribly so that his stomach knotted into a small beating ball and yet his heart and his breath whispered *love, love, come away*, and his arms became so heavy that he could not row another stroke.

The young girl seemed not to notice him. He tried not to let his eyes wander from her face to her slender body solidified by the gradually dripping water and was amazed that the

intense gaze from him went undiscerned. It was the thought that the girl was freezing and damp that dissolved his moronic expression and gave strength to his limbs again. Matteo rowed deftly, swiftly toward the girl.

She still appeared not to notice him, and Matteo sensed he must not speak or yell, but moor his boat on the land and, throwing off his own shirt, jacket and pants he must quickly squeeze her hair dry, take off her sopping requiem suit and...dress her as himself. Then he would...what would he do then? And why was he in such a hurry? He shook his head to dismiss such thoughts, silly girly virgin thoughts (though of course he too was a virgin, but a proud masculine one which made all the difference in terms of the potentiality of the body. Girls became women and got pregnant, had children and died. Who could say what his own life would be?)

“Madam?” he said politely, in a warm voice, and smiled.

There was no movement from the girl. He dared not touch her.

“Mona?” A little closer.

“Magdalene?”

She almost faced him now. “Maria?”

“My sister?”

It all happened so quickly. The girl drew herself up straight. Sitting on her heels she turned her head and looked. They made eye contact. The boy felt himself to be in love.

And then the girl screamed for mighty heaven.

The trace of the scream was there but the girl, the dripping girl had vanished. It was then that Matteo knew that he had seen a ghost, had had a vision, had had a wet dream while fully awake. He knew not if the girl had been his twin, now dead, or if she was Mary inexplicably fallen into hell. Had she had been summoned to the bank on the devil’s command, or was it a sign from God that the dark side of him was incestuous, sacrilegious, appalling, dirtier than filthy? Matteo did not know the answers to these questions at all –

and he would be damned if he would throw himself to the winds, feeling himself free and poetic.

The Bible would be his poetry now.

His protector, his pride, his destiny, his surety, his sigil, his honourable impotence.



Anne-Colette was content at the convent. She set herself to work every day in cheerful spirits for it was pleasant to be in her natural element, which was to make neat again her immediate environment wherever she may be. As well, the thrilling sound of thrice-daily choir practice (and more) rang sweetly in her ears. Many were the times she winked at the sky when she released the flowers and shrubs in the garden from the choke of weeds large and small. The weeds were gathered and placed in a large wooden bin, and added to these detritus Anne-Colette would don gloves every day after the weeding to remove the dung from the lawns, which were the preferred lavatory for the guard-dogs the cook kept with him in his quarters at the base of the frog. If she had a moment to spare she would visit the spaniel and watch it contentedly munch on a large bone thrown out by the kitchen while the sun slowly set between the monk rock and the frog rock. It was then that they turned a golden colour, set off by a blush pink that gradually faded to shadows and then to night. The serving woman felt uncomfortable in the company of others. She lived for the moments where she could be utterly alone and not have to talk or interact with anyone. She was not fearful, but rather completely without vanity or motive and other people tended to find her naïve and child-like in her world-view. So she went on serving the nuns just as if she took no thought for her job but underneath her steady hand she was trembling inside, lest one of the women should address her.

The singing nuns accepted her immediately into their fray, quite without meaning to accept her, they simply did not notice her which was a joy to the servingwoman. The sharp-tongued first sopranos would gossip happily about the second sopranos, especially about

any of the more ambitious ones who dutifully practised higher and higher scales in the hope of promotion when they thought they had privacy in one of the practice rooms.

By the time the serving woman would see them, which was at the evening meal, she could identify the hapless singer or singers of the day by the tears that splashed onto their plates when comforted by another of their kind.

The tenors were a novelty. They were fewer in number and all of them tomboys who gave no trouble. Even when flirted with by some of the soloists, they would merely fix them with a killer's stare and the other tenors would laugh. All in their group would be the sound of jocular teasing of one another and the jilted woman would hurry back to her own friends, cheeks aflame.

When Anne-Colette was a young girl, her parents marvelled at how clean and tidy their modest home would be when they rose for breakfast. Her father would cry in delight, "the pixies have been again!" and Lil Nippa would look at her daughter and they would both smile. It was revealed that the pixies were in fact their own Anne when one night her father saw his eight-year old daughter sitting on her heels, head bowed and seemingly in deep conversation. For even though her eyes were closed her eyebrows would rise and relax again, her head would shake 'yes' or 'no' and she looked so serene that her father did not disturb her. The moonlight that came in through the windows gave her father immediate understanding of many things at once, that is, the pixies were his daughter, his daughter slept very little, she was devoted to her parents' house, and she had an imaginary friend in her head. In future times this acquisition of such friends would be termed under frightening classifications but as this was the time of prayer Anne-Colette's father went softly back to his own bed and slept close to his wife, enveloping her in his arms. He kissed her ear and neck. He felt the swell of her waist, her hip and buttocks. He was filled up with gratitude for his wife who had brought such good fortune to a man. Exactly *why* he felt this was not a question that he asked. It is a mark of maturity to stop asking why, for the creatures return home though they know not the way, nor can measure the miles of the distances they have

travelled. If you feel that ‘the key to heaven was hung on a nail’ then that is heart-break enough, it is all that is required for keys and heavens.

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“Wake,” said a voice. “Wake, Matteo.”

The bishop’s eyes flew open and he saw dark. Immediately his hands felt for his eyes, he must be blindfolded. Blindfolded by the Emperor’s henchmen.

“No!” he cried.

“No?” came the voice.

Matteo was gently but firmly lifted up under his buttocks and armpits off the throne and left suspended in the air. Of course, Matteo instinctively straightened his body once he felt the support leave him but he didn’t come crashing down to the ground. If he could get on the ground that would be a very fine thing indeed but as it was he was scrambling in the air, kicking his feet and willing himself downward.

“A dancer. A bishop dancer.”

Matteo was suddenly calm. He was dead, that was all. But if he were dead then where was his body? And when would he be able to be fully dead, instead of hovering there like an uncertain school-boy, with all of his run-of-the-mill thoughts? Matteo was playing tough, reverting back to Matteo. He touched his index fingertips to both layers of lashes and then, unsatisfied, pulled his eyes wide open, stared up at the dome, shook his head and even danced for a little while as it was lovely to turn oneself over in the air.

He seemed to have momentarily forgotten the strangeness of his situation.

“Matteo is blind,” said the voice.

“And dead,” scoffed Matteo. Immediately he went crashing to the floor. He tried to stand up but when he got himself up-right he was firmly pushed on his chest, body and legs straight, with only his heels touching the ground. It was then that a conversation occurred that scarcely need be described. God and Matteo were fused together in one mind, a mind that did not resemble the ordinary conscious state of everyday being, but rather was the ability to transcend reality and penetrate to the stage of communication with God that is instantaneous, all-knowing and all-encompassing. There is the ability, through the simultaneity of these ‘conversations’ with God and the sudden fall of the house-of-cards of typified experience to take place. Usually the very early hours of the morning would be the time when Matteo would sometimes go into *his fits* – or as some have described, his experience of *ecstatic encounters with God*.

He would come out of these experiences with great melancholy, and be unable to eat or sleep for the next three days at least. The man felt himself to be turning in the air by some unnatural force, but he was at least comforted by the conversation going on in his mind with the angel Zadkiel. After a time when the angel and Matteo had stopped talking, Matteo was returned to his room, still blind, but a blindness of bearable light that could make out shapes and dimensions.

When his domestic came to his room to enquire if he would have breakfast he found him at his desk, writing a letter and dressed as a Franciscan monk, wearing robust sandals. The hood of his cloak was up over his head and he was wearing glasses that looked as though they had been painted on the outer lens with a deep dark-blue paint.

“Are you to travel, my Lord?”

“Yes,” he said, “But be quiet please, I am finishing an important letter.”

Then the older man appeared to sign the bottom of the page, fold it in half and hand it to his man after a slight fumble with its envelope, dropping his pen on the ground.

“Can you put this letter into here for me?” he asked, turning his face away, in the direction of the vast window.

“Of course.”

“I need it- to be- delivered- at once,” he continued haltingly, as if in echo to a villain who held him captive, telling him what to say.

“Yes, it shall be done immediately.”

There was a pause.

“He?” Matteo asked. “Lightly sleeps?”

It was a strange thing to say, and it made no sense but Milo thought nothing strange could occur when in the sphere of a great man like Matteo Serratus.

“Is there anything else that I can assist you with?”

There was a pause. Matteo looked up at his man.

“Have ready a leopard on a light leash and meet me at the palace gates.”

Once the head bishop's orders had been carried out, Milo made his way back to the holy palace. He walked softly and at ease even though he could hear a great din coming from the quadrangular of Matteo Serratus' quarters.

He would simply tell them that His Eminence has gone on a journey and that no one should follow him, for those were His orders. Milo felt that he was born for this job of assisting a great man because he prayed nightly for humility and had been given the bonus of discretion.

Milo walked in to the foyer of the bishop's quarters and was swarmed by black-cloaked priests, altar boys, bishops in red and white. Sobs so deep, jostling elbows, shouts of sorrow and servants running this way and that, with so many orders yelled at them by so many different voices that they were quite at a loss of what to do and stood helpless, teary and weak.

One of the most senior bishops spotted him and came running toward him, his arms outstretched. Milo received the weeping older man and all became quiet as the choir-master sounded a gong. The boy had gone walking over the hills and had spent a good few hours in this way before he finally returned to the monastery. The crowd had gathered in order to witness the body of Matteo Serratus laying in state on a dais at the far end of the courtyard.



Anne-Colette was picking up dung when the messenger arrived at the convent. The sun was taking its magnificent slow recline that threw long shadows over the lawn and made pink the sky. The monk rock, the sinewy tall structure connected to the frog looked as though it were frozen in place only by the human eye that glanced at it, and that it could in fact, grow gold slippers and leisurely walk off into the distance.

A young man of seventeen years came rushing up to Anne-Colette, his longish blonde hair wet with sweat and as his costume consisted only of a thin white singlet bearing an

insignia of a blue ship in mighty motion and grey shorts that only just covered his bronze upper thighs, Anne-Colette was stricken with embarrassment and sat down squarely on the lawn, her head between her legs and her arms crossed over her head.

“Madam,” the boy leaned down to her, catching his breath, “Madam, I have here a missive from the Holy Palace...directed to the Mother Superior...of this convent.” The boy cocked his head and tried unsuccessfully to get the young woman’s attention.

Anne did very much want to carry out the duties required of her, that is, to take the letter to Raquella who would personally deliver it to the Mother but she dared not touch such an important communiqué, it was unthinkable! For even if she washed her hands thrice as thoroughly as normal, she would be loath to insinuate herself into its presence. Anne-Colette had lately been suffering from what she supposed was nothing more than a nervous complaint. She had barely been able to sleep for the past week, and she had turned pale and lost weight. The Mother Superior was working her very hard, day after night after exhausting day, giving her only Sunday to rest. The work itself was demeaning. Anne-Colette had to perform the duties of washerwoman, dish-washer, yard-person and dung-person for her room and board. As a yard-person she had to haul loads of firewood into baskets, sweep leaves, tidy up after the chickens, geese, pigs, goats and sheep. This was her favourite part of the day, spending time with the farm animals that the convent kept.

The rest of the time was spent in laundering the nun’s habits and linen and other items all day and into the evening as well as washing the floors, cleaning the chapel every third day and any other task the Mother Superior thought of for up to fourteen hours a day. She received a brief dinner break after everyone had eaten and after she had washed and dried their dishes and put them back into the cupboards. Anne-Colette would sit by herself in the kitchen, not daring to go out into the dining room and sit down at the table. She would eat her meal in silence and then go on to the attic where the Mother Superior had given her a room, that apart from its triangular roof, was a large space, and airy, for the curtains were always drawn back. Anne-Colette loved to look at the night sky and would stare into the night for many a time before going to sleep. She considered herself to be

fortunate and unfortunate, and would pray with devotion each night, asking for protection and guidance from God and patience with her situation in life.

In this instance, just when Anne-Colette was thinking about her attic room, and how she would very much like to run away there and hide, the Mother Superior came swooping down onto the lawn calling out pleasantly to the boy. She could see that AnneColette was in one of her states so she took pains to ignore her.

“A messenger from Paris!” she addressed the boy, bowing somewhat obsequiously. “I am the Mother Superior of this house.”

The messenger, James, stood to attention and bowed his head. “His Holiness sends his servant to thee,” he said, holding out the letter to her.

☞

Matteo was having a fine time leaping through the forests, crossing ravines, soaring through the air and finding there to be no difference between the air above the earth and the surface of the earth itself. Sharp rocks were no obstacle because they weren't seen, slips in the forest floor required only a slight shift of the balancing point, and the rhythm between Matteo and the leopard was exact. For Matteo gave himself over to the leopard and the leopard held him with valour, just as a child reaches for an adult's hand and the adult is increased, magnified, diminished to completion by the sweetness of that child's trust.

☞

It was a strange letter indeed that the Mother Superior held in her hands, which had begun to shake. She had proudly taken the missive and announced to all the company at dinner-time that she had received a communication from His Holiness (waving the letter with its red wax seal so that all might see it and be in awe) and stated quietly, piously, that she would retire to her rooms and not dine this evening.

She nestled her substantial rump on her satin duvet and read the following:

*Patricia Antonia,
I am coming to your abbey and hope that I should find that all the persons
residing or working there to meet me at an hour past noon. I must insist that
no one be left apart from making this audience. Thanking you, in the name of
our lord.
Bishop Matteo G.*

The same night that the Mother Superior did not eat dinner, Anne-Colette felt heavy-hearted. Her arms and legs were trembling from the effort of assisting the cook with her usual duties and she duly berated herself and asked God to take away her lethargy. This prayer seemed to go unanswered, for she was starting to sense herself as being split from her body. Her heart was beating unnaturally fast and although her feet were covered, they were stiff with cold up to the ankle. ‘*Keep going*’ she said to herself, as she transported plates, cutlery, bread baskets, wine glasses, water glasses, carafes, napkins, condiments back to the kitchen and put them in their place for cleaning. ‘*Keep going*’ as she wiped the sweat from her neck and tipped the flesh-torn bones into the trash bin. ‘*Keep going, keep going*’. She didn’t remember fainting gently to the floor, but she remembered a white horse, she was that horse, and she galloped through forests, hills and fields. Anne-Colette fainted to the floor and the cook had to not only carry the dumb woman to her room, but he also had to finish all of the cleaning on his own.

The sun was beginning to rise when Matteo and the leopard had slowed to a walk. They had slept for an hour or two under the dim light of a half moon and when Matteo woke, the leopard opened his eyes, sniffed the mouth of the man and rose them both to their feet. The leopard smelt water ahead, and gently lead the bishop in this very direction. When they arrived at the still lake, Matteo could see clearly the two rock formations in the distance, of the frog rock and the monk rock. He received the giant cat in his arms and released the leash from around his neck. Gorglioni His Holiness dived into the water.



At the convent the cook had been dismissed, along with his dogs and several weeks' severance pay and most of the nuns were tired and irritated, for the Mother Superior had ordered each one to say their prayers and Hail Marys to the Black Madonna in the order of their station in the choir for no less than fifteen minutes each. None of them had a very good sleep therefore, as the sound of footsteps going up and down the winding staircase to the shrine kept all awake, shushing one another.

The Mother Superior had also been awake all night and her body felt tense and overheated. She had a deep ache in the centre of her back, as though someone had pounded her kidneys with a rolling pin over and over again and she was furious at having to swallow her temper. She was furious at her stupid singers who had driven her to turn a blind eye to the fate of the rebellious women. She was livid that she could not control the expression on her face and produce a becoming and innocent mien for the expected and greatly feared visitor. Why had he demanded that every person be present? Was she suspected of being a criminal herself, and there was someone either in the convent or working there who could incriminate her in her young charges' suicides? She splashed her face with cold water and looked dully at her own reflection, she looked bloated, tired and old. Hurriedly she began to get dressed. Once she had arrived in the chapel for Lauds she announced to the women that

they must, at Nones, congregate together with all hired staff, and walk to the base of the frog mountain so that they may welcome the visiting bishop of Paris.

When they were gathered together the sopranos naturally presented themselves first, behind them the second sopranos, behind them the first altos etcetera. The sopranos were looking forward to seeing a man (any man) but even they tired into silence when the sun reached its apex in the too-near sky. When Raquella ventured to ask what time His Eminence could be expected, she was greatly surprised to be slapped across the face by the Mother Superior. It was a very warm day, and all of the nuns and domestics were sweating profusely.

Matteo rose up out of the water and glided above its surface, turning over this way and that in the air so that his tunic might dry in the brilliant sun. With his darkened glasses on he was able to look up very close to the sun and he marvelled at the rainbow-coloured circle he perceived around it. The dominant colour in the rainbow was reddish-brown and it faded through the colour spectrum until its outer circumference was green which was barely discernible from the azure blue sky. Certainly, the copy and the original sky were merging together – only the red rainbow confirmed itself as existing apart from everything else.

Matteo could sense that he was nearing the edge of the lake as he could hear the lapping of the water touching the bank and the small rocks. He turned himself ‘right way up’ so that he might enjoy the pleasant sensation of walking slowly through the crisp water.

He made his way surefootedly toward the frog mountain, as it was the smaller of the two, as he had been told. “Between two hills stands a convent where one is there who is holier than you” were the words spoken to him in his dream. Matteo was determined to meet such an esteemed personage, he would travel as if his life depended on it.

When he made his arrival in a clearing, he saw the two rocks that are known as the monk and the frog rocks and he heard the company of nuns cry out in his direction. He was thirty feet away from the women when he stopped completely.

Matteo’s left arm raised in the air, lifted by an unseen string. His right arm became as if his eyes, scanning the women before him.

“One-is-missing,” he said and all heard his voice, though he spoke without volume.

The softness in his voice soothed all the company, and gave the Mother Superior the pleasant feeling of instant forgiveness of a series of very grave sins. She ventured toward him.

“Patricia Antonia,” Matteo said in her direction, nodding politely but without affection. “I am not worthy!” And here the Mother Superior fell to her knees and flung her head to the ground.

Matteo stepped over the bulk of the woman’s body and made his way to the waiting women.

“One is missing,” he said again, in a louder voice.

“It is me.”

“It is me.”

“It is me.”

Shaking his head, Matteo walked through the crowd of women with his hands out before him. He entered the convent, taking women by the shoulder at times and looking sharply into their eyes before releasing them and walking on. Every person present desperately wanted to be who he was looking for. But none of them were. Matteo demanded that every person be brought there to the garden before the chapel, including all domestic servants. The Mother Superior was suddenly accosted by a young woman who shouted, “The Mute, she’s killed her and she was the one!”

Matteo removed his glasses and gave over his body. Like a feather he floated and fell, rose and fell and floated again. Sometimes birds can be seen in a flock performing this movement. The most dominant of the flock goes up and goes down as it wishes and all birds move in tandem around each other, although they each of them go their own way. The crowd that had gathered were fading into oblivion as a sweet scent coming from the attic room of Anne-Colette. Matteo inhaled deeply and sensuously, *comeaway-love* was not spoken.

A second circle trembled into being in the fading sky.

And a second. And a third.

There was a circle in the sky that left dissolving traces in the water.



The two sparrows rushed at each other and in that instant, the bodies of Anne-Colette and Matteo Serratus collapsed and died. The light-brown sparrow was being nuzzled on the neck by the other sparrow when the souls left their bodies and met. They joined and were free. Their spirits were set free to be united to one another. When Serratus was shown the vision of “she who is holier” he had no idea of the complete transformation that would be ahead of him. The sparrows twirled with each other in the air. Beating their wings they twirled in the air between the monk rock and the frog and escaped into the forever of the beyond.

The god Khonsu marked the passages of time

In Ancient Egyptian iconography, the Moon is typically found balancing on the head of the god Khonsu, whose name means 'traveller' or 'pathfinder'. Khonsu was responsible for accompanying spirits on their posthumous voyage, defending them against demons. Bronze Age Celts may have placed the Moon at the centre of a similar spiritual system. To help departing souls navigate their journey through the hereafter, a lunar map was carved into a 5,000-year-old burial tomb in County Meath, Ireland.

I appear in a glass ball and float just above the pitted cratered surface of the moon. I am at turns jubilant and dismayed. I am sorry because I feel closer to God here, where the stars burn brighter and the darkness is not interrupted by variations in the landscape due to our planet having water, variations such as lakes, oceans, forests all the five thousand things. The closer I feel to God I cannot help seeing all my grave faults. I have always tried to take every advantage that I could – and I have stubbornly turned a blind eye to any moral transgressions I had to commit in order to get where I felt I deserved to be. I had to in turns steal, lie and cheat my way throughout this race and once I have popped this iridescent glass bubble all of the pieces shall burst out in a series of instances before they disappear and I shall have explained and made amends for all that has gone on. When that happens, it is obviously the end of the five thousand things for me once and for all. When I remember that these will be the last sights I see, I never want it to end. The glittering stars, the monotony of the pitted surface of the moon with its searing dunes and alien rock is worth every dime I took, every life who I showed no pity to. I am not from a moneyed background, I arrived into this world uncared for and I shall depart it uncared for and I care not! The sound of my own voice booms in my ears.

I care not!

Our time is hurting us like the card the Ten of Swords and Khonsu the time travelling bird-headed man is swooping around in the ocean caves back on Earth. This glass bubble that I am in is beautiful, it hums and tinkles, it moves like a skin when you press on it and it is warm. I am not at all sure at what time I will burst this existence of mine and head out on a journey to the underworld. For this, I need Khonsu to protect me with his broad wings from the curses I have toward myself, toward all I've done and thoughts and what I have left are these moments before it will be time to go boldly and be done with it all, forever. I am the Queen of Wands and so I am a country-woman, dark and chaste. Far off, the magician walks hand in hand with the Devil who are both far away from me and soon the knight of Cups comes back to toss flowers all over the place.

It is a sign. I shall take Bridget and her virgin daughters with me and together we'll journey again over the mountain paths to the other side. The companion I need is Khonsu and how to call out to him from here? I may be safe in the glass ball but once I burst it, I will be, for a few seconds, extremely vulnerable. I push and poke the spongy smooth surface of the glass ball and it feels like wet silk, but thick, like satin. It will be no small feat to puncture a hole in which I can be released from this existence of floating around a moonscape, if ever I should tire of it. There is an esteemed monk I am thinking of, who, it is claimed creates

very small holes in the top of the head of the recently deceased, in order to send their souls to heaven. He is able to achieve this after exhaustive meditation. I need right now that monk, and I need Khonsu for protection. There's nothing lonelier than a solitary death, especially when I need to rely on my own wits in order to die in the first place. I shall have to keep my head clear and straight if I am going to pull this off successfully. Eternity, or eternity? That is, eternity (being on the moon) and eternity (the reality of being on the moon) and eternity (longevity) or eternity (death)? I have all these versions of the word and none and all appear to fit my situation. I am pleased to be finally going mad. Perhaps in a fit of exhilaration I will tear a little soul-hole in this glass ball with my bared teeth.

The moon is a greenish grey colour and the emptiness of it is making me feel quite sick. At first it was very beautiful but now it appears dangerous and unwelcoming. There is nothing to tell it apart from the deep fathomless darkness of the sky which yet in this ball feels very thin and still because there are no winds up here to roll me, if I don't want to move I simply dig my heels in and the ball stops rolling. If I want to move, I can, and I can touch the inside of the ball with my hands and feet as I go spinning at whatever speed I want to. Stars glisten meanly in the night sky and I realise that I have a sunset to see in however many minutes or hours are left of the dark. This gives me a new perspective! The sight of the sun rising in the milky way galaxy will be worth it, it gives my life new meaning, that sun will tell the passing of the times sojourning around in the world in order to end up here and with all of that left on earth.

I told you before that if you are reading this, then I have lied and cheated and stole my way to the top, to the very top of human imagination by being on the moon, and this my final resting call. It was all quite by accident. I had answered an advertisement in the classifieds for a maid and it was a role working for an elderly gentleman, doing his house-cleaning and shopping in return for room and board. He was a sharp man, and often busy all day in his "laboratory" for he was a retired scientist.

I have proudly kept the article that I believe captured the truth of the circumstances of my trial, dated March sixth, 2021. A little African girl, around eight or nine years of age appears. She doesn't meet my eyes and is sulky. I hand her the article for her to read. She takes it roughly and the frown does not for one moment disappear from her face.

Speaker: You intercepted a vehicle that was to be taken on the moon for one wealthy woman's choice of euthanasia. You ended up on the moon and then you returned with another country's shape-shuttle, back to earth. My questions to you are numerous, firstly, How did you come to see the invention in question? How did it all start?

Woman: One day I heard my employer on the telephone talking about permits for his latest invention. It was so secret that I could not even understand half of the conversation, for he spoke in riddles and jargon. It was only one night when I could not sleep, and padded down the attic stairs in slippers and nightgown to go to the kitchen and get a glass of water when I saw a light emanating from underneath one of the bedroom doors. I paused outside the door, gingerly placing my hand on the doorknob. I opened the door.

Speaker: Even though you had not asked permission to see the invention?

Woman: Yes. I was there in stealth.

Speaker: Will the court mark that statement?

Ombudsman: Marked.

Speaker: What was inside the room?

Woman: A magnificent pink, silver and gold (seemingly) glass ball, which was gleaming on a pedestal in the middle of the room, on a silver stand. In the room there were water features, such as a rose quartz crystal ball with water flowing down in waterfalls around it. There were also a few carp and some goldfish, swimming around in aquariums that took up the west wall. I felt drawn to the (glass) ball. It had some kind of strange energy that pulled you toward it with incredible force. I scarcely felt in control of my limbs when I came within three feet of it. I shut the door and quickly opened it again for a final glimpse.

In the days that followed I became all ears. I didn't dare tell my employer what I had found and seen, but I was consumed with a desire to know what the function of this pink ball was. It sounds strange to say this, but I felt an emotional connection to the sphere.

A portly gentleman was welcomed into the house on the second night after I made my discovery and I noticed at once his fondness for liquor. Immediately I hatched a plan that I would serve the two men their brandies at the end of the night and when my master indicated that he would retire for the night, I would have filled his visitor's cup to the brim and so he would have no choice but to finish his drink before retiring. This is indeed what happened, and my master indicated to me to make sure that his esteemed friend wanted for nothing while he was guest under his roof.

Speaker: You got Mr. Fairleigh intoxicated in order to find out the secret of the ball?

Woman: Yes.

Speaker: Will the court note that admission please?

Ombudsman: Noted.

Speaker: You seduced him by what kind of means?

Woman: Objection.

Judge: Sustained. Continue.

Speaker: Through getting him drunk you got him talking?

Woman: Yes, I suppose I did. I got him talking by skirting the topic of his famed success as a scientist and inventor, I allowed him to think that I was not in any way on his level intellectually, being an unsophisticated maid. Little by little I returned again to the "amazing" work that he was involved in with my master, cementing both of the men's superior positions to my own and showing myself to be in awe of their formidable minds. Needless to say, on the fourth refill, he exposed everything to me.

My employer and he had been friends since their schooldays. They were in their thirties when they had the idea that if you could invent a capsule, complete with oxygen, bottled water, a person could very well be taken along to the moon on one of the space missions and they could choose to die up there. They were very close friends, like brothers, Mr. Fairleigh admitted. They tried for a long decade to gain funding for this project but were roundly rejected.

Speaker: They were rejected in their applications for government funding?

Woman: Yes, of course. It took the rise of the super-rich, with their desires for travel extending to the outer realms of our universe, to be able to provide the community able to embrace these unconventional ideas of the two gentlemen: a kind of euthanasia option for the rich. I tried to convey a sense that I understood my employer's friend when he spoke so glowingly about his dream to be able to "release beautiful souls from the ennui of existence on this earth". I didn't understand it really, but I knew that I had to somehow be the woman who gets to have this experience first, before everyone else because I had nothing to live for, being childless. I was like the ball, completely empty and hallow. When I opened that door it was as if I had come face to face with my own destiny – like people feel when they have met "the one".

I dreamed of the ball at night. *When I closed my eyes I was filled with voluptuous images of myself, naked, crawling over the ball and have it subsume my entire existence.*

In the days and weeks that followed, the guest of my master (who I only knew as Mr. Fairleigh) would allow me to pour his drinks and talk to me at length about their current project. It had never been so far along as to receive this much excitement about its future money-making abilities. The crystal ball was made of a substance which could be manufactured using sophisticated technology. There were other prototypes of the ball, but this one, the magnificent, sparkling, pulsating ball I had seen in my master's office was the working draft, as it were. The oxygen emitting valves had been inserted, and the appetite-suppressing mist was being developed. An average person would last at the most one week in the ball before electing to make a hole in the surface and so to die in such a magnificent way.

Speaker: A billionaire adventurer, who had already released tickets on his spaceship's flight at one and a half million per person had received a sold-out response. The people who wanted their deaths to be performed on the moon were in their own separate category. So as not to appear cult-like, the billionaire had agreed to allow one passenger per trip in the pink ball, paying the same as his other customers. It was all to be done very discreetly, and the media and general public were not to know a thing about the inter-stellar journey into death that some people had bought the rights to. Mr. Fairleigh told you after three particularly strong whiskeys that the people destined for the glass ball (those who had elected it) were going to be quietly ejected from the spaceship just at the time when their disappearance would be least noticed – namely, in preparing to go home from the moon-trip.

Woman: Yes, that was going to be my plan.

Speaker: Did the idea ever cross either of their minds to volunteer to go themselves?

Woman: No. Not to my knowledge. Neither my employer nor Mr. Fairleigh were wanting to take the trip themselves at this time. As well as my immediate attraction to the ball, which was overwhelming, I was suddenly consumed with the idea of actually becoming the person who got to be ejected onto the moon and left completely alone to decide when to die. It was a matter of principle.

Speaker: What exactly do you mean by that?

Woman: Well, why should the rich people get everything? The rich who had inherited money from their parents and their parents from their parents should be given all of the options in life, all of the freedoms. Why? Why should there be such injustice when it came to experiencing an invention so special and beautiful? I would have to execute a plan so brilliantly, would have to be three steps ahead of these worthy and educated gentlemen, in order to right the balance. It would be *me* who would die on the moon first, me and *no one else* first. I waited.

Speaker: That was presumptuous of you. What happened on the day that the ball was removed from the property to the space-shuttle, how did your employer react? And you will have to tell us how you came to join the crew later.

Woman: Yes, I will explain that. Rather more quickly than I was prepared for, my day came. My employer was too nervous to stay at the house while the ball was being transported out of his sight. Mr. Fairleigh was arranging for the ball to be removed from the house and taken to the billionaire's training camp. The removal men were not to touch it, they were under strict instructions to not go anywhere near it unless absolutely necessary. Men in black, with black leather gloves had been hired to move the precious invention from one place to the next, under armoured guard.

Speaker: So, somebody had the coveted position that you wanted, in the glass ball. How did you uncover her identity?

Woman: It was very difficult. It was a clandestine affair that went on for months. The identity of the lucky person was strictly prohibited and I can assure you that it took much devious searching through mail, tracking phone calls and parcels before I could be sure that I knew who had been chosen, and even then I was doublecrossed because one of the customers turned out to be a decoy – my master had been hoping to catch out the honourable Mr. Fairleigh in what he suspected was his own desire to die on the moon, and so had made an application through a pseudonym. But Mr. Fairleigh was not the customer, and I, little old I, a poor housemaid, had investigated the elusive customer to the end and discovered that she was a widowed woman of great means who had always dreamed of leaving her children and friends and great-grandchildren behind her, at no notice. Not in the sense of dying unexpectedly – quite the opposite! She must have been sick of being taken for granted. Or she may have had a great hatred for members of her family. I don't know, and no one will ever know.

Speaker: Joy Partland-Bruckheimer had toyed with the idea of skipping a boat and slipping into stormy waters when she heard wind of the idea of spending one's last moments, which could be hours or weeks, on the moon, in the milky way galaxy. She had paid the full amount up-front and seeing as she was in her eighties. All she had to do was, when she was willing to die, to let go, she would have to pierce the ball that she so beautifully and wondrously floated in and so to die in the minutes that followed, being without oxygen. Could you tell us how one should create a small hole in the ball?

Woman: No. I was not privy to discussions about how to pierce the ball, no matter how many strong liquors I served to Mr. Fairleigh.

Speaker: If you didn't know how to pierce the ball, did you plan to return to the Earth?

Woman: Yes, if I could.

Speaker: And that was twelve days on the moon? Before another space shuttle arrived and miraculously could indeed take you back home.

Woman: Yes, that's what happened.

Speaker: I believe the police want to see you now.

Woman: Yes. Thank you. Goodbye.

Speaker: Thank you for your time today. Goodbye.

The little African girl crumples the paper in her right hand. "You go over these events like you was a famous person," she muttered angrily.

A

Across the forbidding landscape I see a long-legged figure moving swiftly toward me. As the figure comes closer, I see that he has a moon-shaped crescent on his head and the head of a bird. Khonsu. The ancient Egyptian god of the moon.

The time to leave must be quicker than I think. I turn my head away from Khonsu's approach and concentrate on the night sky. It seems lighter than before, perhaps the sun is closer by. I feel a sudden attack of claustrophobia. The ball in which I am safely ensconced is really a delay of death. It is like a body.

All at once I wish that I had not followed such an obsessive desire to have my own way. I wish that I had had a quiet death, back on Earth with my people. It is enough to have had this wish to make me feel respectable.

But it is too late. Khonsu is fast approaching. He beckons to me that he is ready to stand guard against the demons, that he is strong and capable of protecting me against all forces.

There was a nursery rhyme that my mother used to tell me which was of a white cat that is cursed under a magic spell to become a prince. The cat was very unhappy about being forced into a human body and made to wear clothes and walk on two legs. One day a witch came to the castle and when she saw the cat she said, "You are mine, come back at once!" The spell was broken and the cat leaped into the witch's arms.

"What do I care about you anything you said or did?" asked the young African girl, as she tugged on her curly hair, ripping strands away from the scalp and dropping them to the floor.

⚡

Khonsu stands facing me, less than twenty metres away. The moon on the top of his head has turned, and the sharp end of the crescent moon is exposed like a scythe.

Just then I am moved by some kind of explosion. I scramble to maintain my position in the ball as I am rudely shoved this way and that. I am turning over and over and I am unable to get my limbs to straighten into the holds that the ball was intended for.

I scream as the beloved pink glass ball is rammed by a meteorite and Khonsu shrugs his shoulders, loping away on long thin feet as the sun makes its ascent, destroying the night sky and bleeding its pink and red light throughout the milky way.

Judea 33 A.D.

It was a clear morning. The sun was bright in the sky and the wind was slight. The ground was hard as there were few trees there. Matthew and Thomas were huddled together. Matthew spoke first.

“This was a poor place to choose.”

Thomas was tired of Matthew’s superior attitude. He paused for a while, shaking the dry dirt off his shovel. “All around here it’s the same,” he said, “And he has said that tonight we have to meet urgently.”

Matthew was a handsome man. He wore his hair long and enjoyed the way that women would get nervous when he looked them in the eye when they spoke together. He had very little interest in women for he did not want to marry, and took it as a matter of pride that he could control his instincts whenever he found one of the village girls attractive. There was something in the look of the young women, in their eyes, that he liked to see. If it was disappointment, if it was frustration, if it was hope...he wasn’t sure, but he felt that it was all of these things. Women were looking to fall in love, Matthew thought, and nature had made them that way. Neither man nor woman was he interested in, but at the same time, he loved all of humankind. A part of him was looking to be found by someone like his friend Jesus. He considered himself extremely fortunate to be beyond loving a woman.

“I think that you could have chosen a place closer to the river,” he said. Thomas pushed the wet hair back from his face and glared at his companion. “And then have to travel all the way there, all the way back?”

“Yes.”

A raven was circling above them and suddenly cried out for its mate. Another black bird appeared from behind some steaming rocks, opening its beak and answering in turn.

Thomas felt as though he had the upper hand. To hide his pleasure, which he felt was somehow inappropriate considering their task, he concentrated on the edge of the shovel that he was forcing into the unyielding ground.

“He has said that he wants us to have dinner together tonight. Obviously that means that someone has to prepare the meal. If we just put enough energy into it, we’ll be able to dig a hole big enough, light the fire, put the meat in and be done.”

Matthew sighed loudly, and picking up his shovel and headed for the spot in the ground where they had been digging since sunrise and hadn’t made much progress.

“If this all turns out badly, then so much the worse for you,” he said.

Thomas bristled at this. “Why, what do you say that we do?” he asked of Matthew.

“Tell him the truth. He shall know otherwise.”

“The ground is as hard as a rock. What would he have us do?”

The land around them emitted rays of heat and the shimmering could be seen at a close distance. The clay was a light yellow colour and apart from the fig tree, which Jesus had cursed once for being infertile – one of his rare displays of his immaturity – there was no other vegetation. Scorpions and small snakes darted this way and that, relishing the hot sun. The sweat was pouring from the men. Thomas felt afraid. He did not expect Matthew to go against the word of the Lord. It made him suspect that he was not really a true follower of Him. But he did not want to show his hand.

“He will know that we have tried our best and that is all that can be asked.”

Thomas shook his head. “No,” he said, “considering that He has called us all in like this I don’t think He will be happy with any changes we make for our own convenience. Please, brother, pick up your spade again and dig.”

Mary was in the house preparing vegetables. It was a warm day and all of the windows and doors in the house were left wide open to create a semblance of draft. Before she had begun to prepare for the shared meal that night she was inexplicably anxious. Now that her

hands were employed she was feeling calmer. She and Jesus had lain together that morning and Mary had had the feeling that it was for the last time. Whether or not Jesus loved her, something that she hitherto had never doubted, she now questioned at every turn. Why had she had the feeling that this was to be their last time making love? The idea that there could be another woman who had taken his eye was difficult for her to believe. Certainly, her lover was a flirtatious man but taking up with another woman would have to mean that he had fallen in love with someone else. She did not think him capable of loving two women at the same time and certainly their love had grown out of nowhere, which in her mind only made it more likely to be permanent. There were many men who Mary had had in her bed and it was only with Jesus that she could feel safe enough to let go and actually enjoy the act of love. Jesus knew all of this. She tried to remind herself of his unspotted character while she ran water over the vegetables. He would not fall for some virgin, she said to herself, even though she was afraid of exactly that occurrence. He knows me, he knows my past, and yet he loves me, in spite of everything that any stranger might say.

Mary questioned everything she knew about her lover, all at once, while trying to maintain her composure. The other men would soon be arriving. Matthew and Thomas were out digging a pit for the meat and could also return at any time. She would not cry in front of them, and particularly not in front of Peter. The thought of Peter caused her to start shaking again. He made her wild. There was no way a reasonable person could put up with Peter and Judas and their behaviour toward women. She wished that Jesus could see that they were very weak people, weak and disloyal. Her heart sank as she heard footsteps on the hearth and the sound of an animal walking in the dry dust, being led by its owner.

“Hello?” she called.

Into the house walked Martha, who was heavily pregnant and looked dishevelled. Judas was walking up the path behind Martha, taking the hand of her little boy and chatting animatedly with him, pointing out little lizards that darted between the rocks.

Martha enveloped Mary in a fervent hug. “Oh my friend!”

Mary pulled back, with her arms still around the shoulders of Martha.

“Why, what has happened?”

Martha began to cry. Mary signed to Judas, indicating that he should keep the child happy for a little while. She led Martha over to a chair at the long table that was being set up for tonight’s meal. It was plain and barely more than a slab of wood rested on other slabs of wood. She rubbed the grain. It was the first time that it had occurred to her that Jesus had probably made it himself. Mary took out a small scarf from her drawers and began to dab Martha’s tears, which were freshly running.

“What has happened, Martha?” Mary asked again.

“I had a dream last night Mary,” the other woman said, “and in it we were running in a forest, we were trying to get away from soldiers. There were...hundreds of them. They were laughing as they gained on us. They were about to rape and kill us! Bowls were being thrown by them, they were exploding at our feet.”

Mary was disturbed by the dream because she had had a very similar one only three nights before that day. Only she was alone, walking by a series of caverns and there were flowers all around the caverns. She had stumbled upon a mirage and had been running away from pursuing soldiers. She had woken in a sweat, for she took dreams and their contents rather seriously.

Mary forced herself to laugh lightly. “It was a dream induced by fear,” she said gently, “and the idea of the soldiers chasing us, it is just because we are so close with Jesus and we are worried, being women, what might happen if they were to interrogate us. We are simply afraid of being disloyal to Jesus, that’s all. In actual fact, if we did have the misfortune of being interrogated by the Romans, why, we would be loyal to the very end, and that’s what your dream is trying to tell us, to be bold.”

Martha shook her head. “No,” she said, “The men were about to rape and kill us and there was no one to help! That is what will happen if we are ever caught.”

Martha's expression was one of wide-eyed fear, in earnest. Just then a strong wind whipped throughout the house, causing the brightly-coloured pottery bowls that had been placed on a smaller table, some filled with vegetables, to come crashing to the ground. Martha screamed in fright. Her little boy came running into the house yelling, "Mama!" Judas swept the little boy into his arms and consoled him while Mary led her friend away to the room where she herself slept. Jesus was often in her bed, but he had his own room also. Mary bid Martha to lie down and then, covering her with a light blanket, she went and rinsed a cloth that she sprayed with a dilution of rose and lavender water and placed on the woman's forehead.

"Everything is fine," she said, just as if she wasn't at all disturbed by the bowls breaking. "Judas and I will take care of Sabah. Just have a little rest and it will all be fine."

"The bowls smashed," Martha said.

"It was just the wind, just the wind."

Mary went out of the room and back to where she had been preparing the vegetables. Judas had put the child onto a chair and given him sticks to play with as toys while he was on his hands and knees picking up the broken shards. Something had changed in him, Mary thought. The Judas that she knew wouldn't lend a hand to help a woman with her work – although he did love children and took any excuse to play with them. But helping with chores was not typical behaviour for him.

"Thank you," she said.

Judas looked at her with bright, exquisitely happy eyes. "You're most welcome, sister," he said. His voice carried a sarcastic undertone which Mary shrugged off. Judas was taking handfuls of vegetables and throwing them into a bucket that stood nearby, filled with peelings.

"I can do it," Mary offered, suddenly repulsed by the figure of Judas, although she had no reason.

Judas stood up and holding the bucket out to her his eyes fixed on Sabah, who he swept up into his arms and started telling him a nonsensical story which made the boy giggle with delight.

Mary went down on her hands and knees to pick up the rest of the destroyed vegetables. She had finished sweeping up the mess on the floor. She paused, looking out across the arid landscape. The wind continued to get stronger and she could see tumbleweed rolling across the plains. Suddenly Judas appeared again at the door. The little boy was excitedly chattering to him but Judas looked hard at Mary.

“Where is Matthew?”

“Out in the field with Thomas, preparing a fire pit.”

Judas smiled. He put the child on her knee and made off for the withered fig tree.

Jesus was by turns feeling both extremely tired and, like a man rescued from the jaws of death, utterly exhilarated at being alive. Sleep had not come to him for the previous three nights for his father had much to communicate with him and he had taken him all over the world, tumbling in the air and laughing with delight at everything they witnessed. There was the river Ganges with the elderly men bathing in it in white loincloths, there were the rice paddy fields of south eastern China, there were the magnificent cliffs of rock in the Americas and everywhere children were playing games, chattering in tongues. Women were giving birth and men were pretending to be strong. They saw all manner of sights, all manner of deceit, of love, and of nobility that Jesus was reassured that all was one, for his father had given humankind free will and women being more honourable than men would balance the scales in the tale of humanity in the ages to come.

Jesus felt an overwhelming love for all of the scenes he saw, both the nature and the people in them. He and his father also witnessed the magnificence of the world's creatures, both great and small, many of whom, such as the lion and the antelope that Jesus had never seen up

close. When he was a young boy of around seven or eight years his father would take him on similar journeys but the difference here was that they only lasted for one night. His father would not yield on this matter, and Jesus begrudgingly went off to sleep two nights after the sleepless one, hopelessly praying to his father to take him again, and yearning for the adventures to begin once more.

He never told anyone about them, not even his mother. When he grew older, his father would allow him to come journeying with him to see more difficult sights: animals being mistreated by the thousands, money passing hands in return for the naked bodies of small children, beaten women left to die in scorching fields, men being murdered for money, armies marching to their deaths over other men's arguments and wealth. He did not need much exposure to feel a kind of outrage at conscious injustice being meted out on fellow creatures when his father had given them life, and had given them free will. The fact of humanity's proclivity for sin depressed him and to his shame, also made him feel anxious in his more private moments. Unbeknown to Jesus, the seeds had been sown to create an undeniable temper that he was not able to control when he came across any instances of committing wrongs against one another and against the church of his father.

When he was twelve years old, he had been walking through his home-town of Galilee and saw money-lenders operating in the church. From eighty metres away he had seen a few tables outside the church and people standing behind them, giving and receiving papers of debt and exchange, gold and so forth. The fact that the money-lenders should be conducting their corrupt and greedy business at a place of worship he could not for one moment understand. He had walked across the road, walking directly to the door of the church. When the men slyly greeted the boy and told him that it was for "grown men only", Jesus had picked up the three tables and thrown them, scattering their coins to the ground and the corrupt men had run away, frightened.

Jesus had been journeying with his father the night before this incident. 'Will it never end, Father?' he had prayed that night but he needed to feel closer to his father. He did not sleep

until his father pulled Jesus's head into his own lap and stroked his hair. They did not journey for several months, and Jesus was comforted by his father's decision. But equally, Jesus would not trade their journeys and experiences for anything else on earth. It was an experience that was higher even than physical love, and just as intoxicating.

Jesus paused and sat on a ledge that overlooked the Sea of Galilee. The day was so hot that he would have loved to have been able to refresh himself by going swimming in the water. He closed his eyes. He could hear footsteps coming toward him but he did not have to open his eyes to know who it was, he could tell from the rhythm of the footsteps that were uneven and syncopated. Jesus felt an arm around his shoulder.

"Here he is!" said the voice.

"Here I am, Satan," said Jesus, without opening his eyes. The smell of his visitor was sour. He kept his eyes closed as the grip of Satan clutched at his shoulder, digging into his shoulder bone. Without thinking, he shrugged him off and, opening his eyes, looked into the other's. The journeyings with his father often had the effect of making him particularly susceptible to meeting Satan. So Jesus had been visited by Satan that many times he had quite lost count of the total. His visitations brought about a crippling feeling of dread that Jesus felt almost powerless to overcome.

It has been said Satan is a beautiful angel, with long fair hair and almond-shaped green eyes. His full, sensual mouth is completed by a handsomely slim nose and fine cheekbones. The fineness of his features combined with the gentle confidence in his eyes made many mistake him for a handsome man. For the truth was, up close, the aeons had not aged him, but rather malice had done its work on those same attractive features. His beauty was now chiselled and cruel, he almost looked gaunt. He looked like an older man who had seduced many women and had been destroyed by so much promiscuity. He had not lost his blonde hair but it was thinning, and there were shadows under his eyes. His skin was slightly pock-marked.

Jesus pushed him roughly on the chest and the angel shuddered slightly and fell back.

"Have you to do always what your father asks?" Satan laughed. He loved violence.

The young man did not answer but began sat back on the rock to draw circles on the ground, both large and small, with his index finger.

“How are you?” Satan asked.

Jesus sighed and the image that came to his mind was the sparkling Sea of Galilee.

Satan put an arm around Jesus’ shoulders. “You’re tired, aren’t you?”

Jesus sighed and his hands started to tremble. He didn’t like feeling this kind of anger, it made him very uncomfortable. But whenever he met Satan he could barely contain himself.

“Do not speak to me,” he said in a firm voice with his shaking hands.

Satan stood up and his form grew taller and wider.

“Your father is in fact jealous of you. He was jealous of me too.”

Jesus did not answer.

“Take me at my word for it, friend,” Satan said, laughing quietly.

A strong wind was beginning to rise and the cicadas were falling away. The birds were no longer visible from the landscape where the Satan and Jesus sat talking. Jesus felt as though he were entering a new kind of love for his father, when you listen to the words of one who hates him and you are not perturbed.

Yet he was also afraid of the event of his slow death in front of the cacophonous rabble. He kept himself to himself, even when it came to women. Certainly, he felt as though he loved Mary Magdalene, he wanted to marry her and have a family with her. He would never admit this to Satan, but he felt afraid, in his most private moments, that, like his father, Satan could also read his mind. He tried to put the image of Mary naked, her hair falling about his face, from his mind so that Satan could not see her. He stared instead at the sun, until his eyes watered and made blotted the bright white clouds in the sky. Jesus was an intensely private man, and filled with compassion. The fact that the crowds would be cheering to support his crucifixion made him utterly depressed. He didn’t know how his shameful spectacle of dying would save all of humankind from sin.

“You are nothing to him but yet another being who he can control to suit his own ends. You will be crucified in front of a cheering mob, that is his destiny for you.”

His body was trembling and his fingers and arms felt stiff and cold. Still Jesus’s mind was becoming more confused. Why couldn’t he marry Mary and have a family with her, continuing to do his works for as long as he was able? Isn’t the purpose of a man’s life to serve his father, doing good works, and as a reward, could marry and have a family?

“So very caring of a father toward his son.”

“My father cares for me!”

The sun beat down, but still his hands were cold to the touch. He noticed that the angel Satan had taken off his white robe and had loosened the first several buttons on his white shirt. His skin was a deep tan and Jesus noticed that the hair on Satan’s chest was thin and sparse. For some reason he thought of his father’s body. He realised that it was full of blanks: he had never held his head against his chest, only his father’s lap, and he had felt his father’s hands but he had never seen his feet or run his fingers over his father’s face or hair.

The black birds were floating high above them in the late afternoon sky, a male and a female that began to cry out for each other. They were enormous black eagles who were powerful and strong. Jesus watched as they spread out their arms across the bright blue sky, staking their claim, stretching their huge wings.

Satan turned slightly away from Jesus and indicated toward the mountains to the west of the Sea of Galilee. Jesus’s gaze followed to where he pointed and stared dully.

“There is his son. In chains. Nailed to a crucifix.”

Satan paused a while, and seemed to grow somewhat younger – his hair regained a kind of sheen and his face began to fill out pleasantly.

“His son is bleeding to death on the crucifix. His feet and his hands are nailed tight, and he stands almost naked on a small block of wood, carved into the crucifix to prolong the agonies of an execution by nails. His son has been whipped along the way. The lacerations on his back stream with blood.”

Jesus was stunned with horror for himself and for humanity as well. He was suddenly frightened of what lay ahead. So frightened that he could barely think for himself.

“Nailed above his head are the disreputable words, ‘King of the Jews’ and he wears a crown of thorns on his head...”

Jesus began to reach out to Satan who kept speaking, “...and he is hung alongside degenerates and scum in front of a mocking mob of lunatics!”

Satan stared out into the landscape and Jesus felt as though all of a sudden, his memory was gone and he was unable to remember specific dates, familial connections, or anything that had happened before this very moment of sitting in this place, on these rocks, looking out onto the crashing waves of the Sea of Galilee with the angel Satan.

His father had made him understand that sins would be forgiven through his crucifixion, but how, exactly? He couldn't remember any more.

Jesus squinted up at him.

“What would you have me do?” he asked, in a faint voice, his heart sinking.

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Judas climbed steadily over the cliffs of yellow clay that led to the ground down below where he supposed Matthew and Thomas could be found. It was Matthew that he really wanted to see, but Thomas was no threat and, anyway, nothing could be done about it. He felt in his pockets for the forty pieces of silver and felt a thrill as his fingers touched the metal grooves in the sides of the coins. A goat bleating nearby irritated him and he threw a stone in its direction. Judas had to escape, and he thought that Matthew would make good company for him. They were both intelligent and strong, and could make a go of things. He trusted Matthew more than the others because of his studious air and reserved composure that could be delighted by a

witty or scathing remark. Judas thought that it was a side of his nature that did not receive much attention, the wiliness of the potentiality of his intelligence.

Slightly out of breath, Judas reached the top and began to descend. He could make out the fig tree and Thomas and Matthew digging the ground. He had to choose his steps carefully, for the track was in disrepair, and was crumbling in places. If his feet skidded as he came around a particularly sharp corner, large pieces of softened clay and rock would come loose and go tumbling down into a ravine. Judas felt aided by his sudden loot. Why, he could pack up and go to Rome or Sicily like any other fellow when all of this went away. He could go there sooner. Judas cursed as he slid hard down the hill, grabbing onto the roots of a climbing tree in order to be able to right himself again. He had sprained his ankle, and now he walked with a kind of syncopated rhythm. Judas tore off a piece of his head-robe and used it to bandage his ankle.

He limped toward the two men once he reached the bottom, but seemed to grow in strength and agility step by step. Once he was only a few metres from them he was no longer limping.

“Hello there, brothers,” Judas said.

Thomas had been muttering under his breath at something Matthew had said. He got a fright when he heard Judas’s voice behind him and dropped his shovel. Matthew was pleased to see him.

“What are you doing here, friend? Come to help?” Matthew said as he reached out to shake Judas by the hand. Judas laughed as he shook dirt off his hand.

“Yes, I’ll certainly help out,” he said as he gestured for Thomas to give him his shovel.

Thomas warily handed it to him and stood bewildered as Judas forcefully plunged the head of it into the tough ground. In half the time or less, Judas had succeeded in digging the depth of the hole that was required if they were to have the animals prepared in time. The three men stood for a while, looking into the pit. Then Judas, looking up, saw the fig tree nearby. Without a word he gave Thomas back his shovel and as if in a daze of love, he walked toward the tree. It was hitherto a barren tree, and now there were hanging three figs right in the centre

of it, and some of its branches had thickened and sprouted thick and thin leaves. Judas stroked the leaves with his thumb and forefinger, reached out and taken the fruit from the tree. He put them in his other pocket and returned to Matthew and Thomas.

Thomas was saying, "By the looks of the sun, it is three hours or more since noon. If we don't get the fire lit now and the animals down, we'll not make it in time." Matthew was ignoring him and watching Judas make his way back to them from the fig tree. It wasn't like Judas to offer to help anyone, even his own brothers and Matthew felt pleased that he had come. He was the most rebellious of the men, and the most clever, Matthew thought. Apart from Jesus himself, he was very well-read on the Scriptures, biology and astronomy and had a wicked sense of humour. Judas was always up for pulling pranks or drinking wine or making sarcastic jokes. A part of Matthew was pleased that Judas was there with them, for he found Thomas dull. He turned his back to him and sat by the pit, crossing his arms in front of his lifted knees.

"Matthew, Matthew," Thomas was saying, "We have to hurry."

At this moment Judas clapped an arm around Thomas's slight shoulders.

"Ready to light the fire, brother?"

"Yes I am ready. I have been ready all this time."

Together they threw leaves and kindling wood into the pit. Judas struck a match and tossed it in. Immediately the flames caught the leaves and the fire was under way. Judas and Thomas lowered the three lambs into the pit and covered them with woven dried flax over a rack of steaming cloths.

Matthew gathered up the shovels and together the three men headed back to the home where Jesus would be expecting them. When they were about to descend onto the other side, Judas tugged Matthew's shirt, whispering in his ear, "I need to talk to you."

Matthew and Judas took a few paces away from where Thomas was and Judas said to Matthew, "I may be leaving here for a time. After tonight you will know more. I can't tell you

about that. But I know that I will go either to Rome or to Sicily and if you want, you can come with me.”

Matthew was surprised, but delight quickly turned to resignation. “You know I can’t leave him,” he said simply.

Judas fixed him with an intense stare and then smiled. “After tonight, you’ll see.”

“What do you mean, brother?”

Judas, his hands in his pockets, repeated, “You’ll know after tonight. Not before.”



With a heavy heart Jesus watched the back of Satan as he loped away into the hills and disappeared. He was numb with grief at having almost betrayed his father. Jesus stood up and began to walk back to the home he shared with Mary Magdalene. Along the way he barely noticed the small creatures running to and fro, he thought only of his utter uselessness. He was unfit to be called his father’s son and today Satan had shown him to what extent he could be influenced by someone who dealt expertly in the flesh, and all the attendant fears and desires that beset a person who is trapped in the fleshly existence. He, Jesus, was not special, he was very ordinary, and he meant to dismiss his friends from his company accordingly. He had no right to lead them.

Upon arriving at the gate of the long pathway that lead to his home he was surprised by Sabah, who came running at him, followed at some distance by Martha, who looked pained. He knelt down to receive the child, and held him in his arms. The child was chatting happily when he caught up with Martha and the three of them walked the remaining distance to the house.

Inside, Mary was sitting at the table, staring into space. She leapt up when she saw Jesus.

“Matthew and Judas have gone back to get the meat, but I am afraid the vegetables were knocked off the table by the wind and I have nothing else for tonight’s meal.”

Jesus did not have the heart to tell her that the meal was not going to go ahead as planned. He reassured Mary, saying that he was sure that they would have a good dinner together with their friends and that everything would be all right.

Sabah came up to Jesus, holding three figs in his hands. "You can have this," Sabah said.

Jesus' blood ran cold. "Where did you get those, Sabah?"

"Uncle Judas gave them me. You can have them!"

There were no fig trees for miles. Jesus knew that the fruit had come from the tree he had cursed and inwardly he cried out his sorrow to his father for betraying him. "Thank you, Sabah," Jesus said, taking the figs.

He turned to Mary, whispering, "Destroy these," as he dropped the crushed figs into her hands.

At that moment Thomas ran into the kitchen, sweating profusely. "Jesus!" he cried, "The fire has gone out and the meat is still raw! I told Matthew, I told him..."

A ringing started in Jesus' ears. All was starting to come true, just as Satan had promised. A curious cold-heartedness came over Jesus and he got a glimpse of himself crucified in front of the cheering mob and that image did not move him.

"They shall drink my blood for wine and my body for bread," he said simply.

"What do you mean, my lord?" questioned Thomas.

"My body and my blood will be given up for our friends and for people everywhere," Jesus said in a strong voice. "Help me prepare for tonight. I need only a little bread and a little wine."

Within an hour the eleven friends of Mary and Jesus were beginning to file into the house.

Pupuri to Taonga! (Don't Let Them Take Your Treasure!)

When the Ball-room Dancing Plague began it affected those most sensitively delighted, those most idealistically faithful people, those most diligent people who were all at the mercy of W.'s decision. Gravity was compromised, defied, obliterated. It was the reverse of the election of D. At that time all of those who were compassionate became, according to their constitutions, as heavy or as light as scattered paper that had been torn up in rage. The difficulty in the whole situation was that the election of D. followed hard on the heels of W.'s decision, which gave people hope. The people who had suffered the least, that is, those most able to bear such exquisite happiness were those who were kept in charge of the management of the others. The very weak were as dead weights dreaming of glass shoes and clowns, the very strong were as leopards and flying macaws. There was nothing to do for it but dance with anyone you came into contact with in the many wide-open spaces in the parks of the city. One could take one's time over caring for this 'step' or for this 'step'. Men and women clasped each other proudly, with heads tipped back and beaming smiles. Certain roguish types made the Plague into a competition, taking a park-land as a stage in which the objective was to corner any other couples who happened to be dancing around them.

W. did not revel in the unexpected attention which came to her as leader of the tiny country of New Zealand, isolated by the ocean. The people of New Zealand were expectedly dismayed about the situation. There could be no question of which there were any plausible answers. The politicians opposed to W. put ninety-eight thousand questions to the leading party and many good people were literally weighted down by gigantic stacks of paper. Mountains of probing questions demanded specific dates and time-allocations. They were ingenious in their probing, for they were very annoyed by W.'s decision not to prosecute anyone in the Dancing Plague. W. reasoned that because no crimes were being committed, it would be wrong to. Many wanted justice, for someone to at least pay for the damages sustained to almost all of the infrastructure of the capital city. Women's stiletto heels pierced

hoses, hardwood floors, glass elevators and the limbs and bodies of those who had collapsed. A stampede of a thousand teenage dancers broke the waterway from as far out as fifty kilometres from the city, which prevented water from reaching the populace past three days' supply. Fires had broken out in the eastern part of the capital, because stoves and heaters caught on fire, unattended. The tops of houses gave many a good person a great deal of trouble, for, like astronauts, they found it impossible to stay seated or standing and were house-bound, bouncing their heads against their own roofs. Social visits were impossible because the people who were not outside were bloodied and bruised. W. declared a state of emergency and the armed forces were called in, the firefighters, the ambulance drivers, doctors and nurses worked around the clock attending to those young and old with broken limbs or collapsed, half-dead.

A separate faction of people, made up from communities all over the capital city, set out to prosecute those who had caused such willful damage to their property by taking part in the Dancing Plague. They of course believed that it was not a plague at all, and could therefore be seen as intentional act that was criminal, and could be charged through the law. These people were so accustomed to apprehending the world from a humanistic viewpoint that they assumed that everything that was 'good' for individual man was good for the world at large; if a man grows up poor and then makes an entrepreneur of himself, he is a "success" story, but they don't realise that the very word "success" is borne from capitalist ideologies.

On the second day in a small rural town where the plague had not yet spread, a piano lesson was being conducted by a woman to a girl of around fifteen years of age whom nobody liked. Her eyes were brown and her hair, long and thick and curly was darkly brown, almost black. She was by all accounts an attractive and naïve girl. Mr. and Mrs. Jonquil had decided to adopt Ahurewa when she was around eight years of age - an age at which, of course, her character was already drawn and had only to be moulded by good Christian ideals such as the couples' own. By always being obedient and therefore causing no disturbances to anyone while secretly holding herself superior to them in intelligence, Ahurewa was particularly skilled at playing the part of a self-effacing girl which gave her character an asexual

impression. Vanda was a small rural town, with a miniscule population: only three thousand residents made up the entire area of one hundred kilometres square in 2017.

About the young girl, Ahurewa was rather difficult to like. She was drawn toward music from having to contain within herself a great amount of emotion that required release, but she was not naturally obedient, nor disciplined to return to a difficult passage again and again until her fingers felt sure of their movements. She was bitter and superior and not properly present in her body. If only she could stop gossiping and getting offended by others, if only she could remain mute and let the body speak for itself. That would have required an exquisite confidence in her being, in the very fact of her being. Ahurewa spent most of her time analysing others in a critical way. Often, when alone, she would ruminate over conversations from many months past, wondering if she had said the wrong thing. She was looking for a way to be wanted by everyone she came into contact with, more than most teenagers do. At her best, that is, when most sorely pricked by conscience she would have liked to have been murdered.

She affected a sarcastic attitude when around others so that she had rather few friends and the girls who she did have as friends she was often irritated by if she could not bully them or, by turns, build their confidence in themselves so that they might become more cynical and prone to langour.

Ahurewa was a competitive girl in conversation, and spoke a little like an old woman, constantly referring to the past. No technique of self-improvement of her personality could work effectively with her adoptive parents in the story of Ahurewa because they, her adoptive parents, disliked Ahurewa the most. At the orphanage where they were introduced to her, she leapt into their arms and by this display of emotion it was decided that it would be too cruel not to take that particular child away who so obviously wanted parents of good character and to savour sweetly some sort of stability in her life.

By the time that Ahurewa was around twelve years of age, Mr. and Mrs. Jonquil decided to hire a tutor for her that could teach her singing and piano as they felt that the child

was wanting in confidence and achievement. She was slender, with regular features and did not excel at anything in particular. At the orphanage there had been a middle-aged spinster with an understanding of the basics (although very little Italian) and she had spent several hours a week out of her own spare time with the girls to teach them to read music and Ahurewa took it upon herself to spend much time in the small music studio alone, swinging wildly between the most simple pieces to hurried waltzes, sonatas and polka, varying the timbre from fortissimo to mezzo piano which gave the illusion of innate talent. She was self-conscious even while practising alone, as if every time she sat down at the piano to play, she was about to deliver an important performance to a paying audience. The staff at the orphanage boasted proudly to the Jonquils that certainly the child was a pianista supremo, a prodigy, an unstoppable force, destiny beckoned, and so forth, with winks and proud smiles.

The young man the Jonquils first hired as their daughter's tutor was an accomplished pianist who was studying performance at the university. His position as a teacher was a pecuniary interest only, and he was dismayed by having to give lessons to Ahurewa, whose playing was wild and unruly at allegro, too slow and sentimental at largo and she herself was saccharine with him besides. It was quite beyond him to continue teaching her and he was replaced by another tutor. This could not happen until after Ahurewa had gone through the tumult of being scorned again, his sudden entrance and subsequent exit from her life deeply upset the girl, she spent more weeks crying and wincing over his departure than he had spent teaching her. The Jonquils assumed that the girl had developed some kind of infatuation with the young man and reprimanded themselves for not predicting this outcome.

The following week Mr. and Mrs. Jonquil had the good fortune of being introduced after Sunday's mass to a young woman who was bubbly and enthusiastic, having just started out in teaching music at one of the schools, she happily accepted Ahurewa as her new pupil, starting that very same Tuesday at four o'clock on the dot. Ahurewa would have to walk over to the college where Miss Manner's studio was, which was good exercise for the girl, initially the lessons would be for forty-five minutes duration increasing to sixty minutes as Ahurewa progressed, both theory and practical as well as giving Mrs. Jonquil a break from the routine

of her early evening being taken up by the too-loud sound that the piano always gave off when Ahurewa sat down to play. Shutting the door did little to dampen the noise, but at least the piano was better placed in the dining room – for when they had first pushed their piano into the girl’s bedroom, she would play it even after dinner, teaching herself by ear the vapid music contemporary to her generation saying that she had already completed her homework.

It was the year 2017 with a very-strong focus toward the promises in the year 2018 in New Zealand. City life for an adult consisted of long commutes and continual compromise: the shy would take sales jobs, the unskilled either did manual labour or started their own businesses and became rich or got mixed up and lost and everyone was always comparing their lives to everyone else’s. Commiseration became the replacement for envy and dislike. Those too honest for commiseration were honourably too busy in dealing with ways to bring order back to New Zealand because of the Dancing Plague. In proper bourgeois fashion, the television was filled with programmes on weddings, blind dates and light-hearted advertisements for funeral cover insurance. The honourable quietened the television, kept it turned off, but there remained the practical affairs to deal with, for people were starving to death stuck in the tops of pine trees. Impeccable people were causing crashes on the roads and motorways through no fault of their own, but because they would be suddenly freed, for an indefinite time, from the power of gravity.

One hundred and seventeen people died of the Dancing Plague from sheer exhaustion and sudden heart arrest or otherwise, due to dancing instead of sleeping, eating or drinking or working or anything at all for four days straight or even more, some claim eight days awake, in a frenzy. Some politicians claimed these deaths to have also had other complications, addictions to alcohol being one of them. Alcohol therefore became something prized.

Death in New Zealand was sanctioned, you never talked about it until after it happened to someone you knew. Death had to become as something abstract yet obvious, something lightly serious and hateful. The news channels churned the mass of human bodies into

statistical events that competed with each other over official death-tolls. It was important to keep up with the latest disaster.

There was a glut of advice. There were too many words, too much stimulus for the ego. Real estate agents would post homilies outside their offices, advice on how to live, sanitary-pad wrappers were covered with encouragements to women to live life to the full, advertisements for loo paper concluded with a jingle 'we are the choices we make'. At any moment one could be given a hearty piece of advice that one did not ask for, such as how to laugh like you've never been hurt or how to cry like you've never been hurt. 'You are unique' was the catchphrase. In short, there was a considerable amount of pressure on the advertising agencies to keep everyone separate, yet equal, compelled to continue competing to be better, or more alert, or bigger or thinner. The supporters of D. noted that in New Zealand the poor people were often fat which reflected well on the country because it meant that there was no true poverty here, but only mistakes on the part of the individual. *Fait accompli!* said the people who were proud of inserting French phrases into any conversation but who did not actually speak French. Those same people were proud of mispronouncing the language of New Zealand. They emulated the people of England, the wealthy ones who rode horses.

Miss Manner did not sense any of this and was unaware of the Plague as Vanda did not receive television transmissions as electricity was banned. There were no traffic lights. The local iwi had decided that because the area was built upon a volcano, drilling the ground and installing power lines was extremely risky. There were few residents, and most were rural types in the sense that they were genuinely happiest when living in natural settings. Very few countries are able to boast of New Zealand's beautiful scenery and Vanda was no exception, tucked away in rolling hills and situated near a volcano lake. Miss Manner had lived in Vanda for most of her life. She was of a happy and uncomplicated disposition, and moreover was discreet. Miss Manner was fortunate in that she had been blessed with being born into exactly the right circumstances under which her personality could blossom and flourish. It was difficult to find fault with such a person, and at first Ahurewa was frustrated because she was intimidated by Miss Manner's cheerfulness. But her presence had the favourable effect of

grounding the girl, who for the first three lessons was not given any time on the piano in which to belt out some frenzied piece or two. Instead, Miss Manner began with theory and they would go over to the piano only in order to demonstrate the teacher's point in the lesson. She seemed not to be perturbed by Ahurewa's fake yawns and would gently remonstrate with her to sit up straight and to look lively. Often she would look directly into the girl's face while she was talking and ask her if she understood what her teacher was telling her and Ahurewa, acquiescing, became polite and answered yes instead of nodding. Several times Miss Manner saw that her pupil said yes when her expression indicated that she didn't understand and so she would deftly switch to a different way of explaining the same principle. In this way the two progressed throughout the first term, as if Ahurewa was an experienced pianist who had inexplicably lost her memory and things had to be explained as if for the first time; a thorough and yet rapid pace. Ahurewa and her teacher Miss Manner would find themselves caught up in the Dancing Plague by being punished along with a group of individuals who all had something in common.

It was in the middle of one of her lessons with Miss Manner that there was an imperious knock at the door. The young woman instructed Ahurewa to carry on while she stood up and opened the door.

There was a policeman standing there, short in stature. His penetrating eyes made her feel inexplicably guilty. No one spoke for a small moment.

"Miss C. Manner?" the police officer finally asked.

"Yes."

"You're under arrest."

"What for?"

"Who is *that child*?"

"My student."

"She is also therefore under arrest. Now come with me."

Crystal and Ahurewa found themselves herded by the short policeman into a marked police van that was parked outside of Crystal's apartment. A loudspeaker placed on top of the police van repeated 'get life back on an even keel!' to applause that came from itself. The car was travelling rapidly and when the driver applied the brakes, the two women found themselves almost thrown to the floor. On and on they were driven, they saw people collapsed on the street, mutilated by cars that had no choice but to drive over them. Innards and brains were exposed, there was blood. A mute Japanese boy ran alongside the police van waving a flag that bore an open scream, staring fixedly ahead of him. Crystal held her position as the comforting elder, holding the sobbing Ahurewa and singing softly to her. There was a partition between the women and the police officers so that once Ahurewa had cried herself to sleep, Crystal wiped her tears with her scarf, and opened the only window slightly. Immediately the blue and white scarf with its paisley design was sucked out of the van by the open window. Crystal gently took off her cardigan and placed it under the head of the girl and knocked on the hard plastic wall. The police officer turned around and there was a commotion on his face. 'Be straight-backed at all times' said the loudspeaker to great applause.

Onwards they drove until the dawn broke. Crystal did not sleep at all and though her conscience was clear, she was shaking by the time the dawn rose. The police officer slammed on the brakes which woke Ahurewa who looked wildly about her until her eyes rested with relief on Miss Manner.

"What's happening?" the girl asked.

The harsh sunlight made the two women wince as the doors to the police van were opened.

'Get out!' said the loudspeaker.

The women found themselves in a clearing of redwoods. They were shackled, but the others who had been left in the redwoods were hovering in the air. The people, of all shapes and sizes were calling out to each other, singing, dancing, spinning in the air. A woman in a cape that bore a picture of the eye of a peacock feather was singing que sera, sera, three young men made sweeping gestures with their hands and feet, as if swimming unselfconsciously in the air, a couple in their thirties were paused in the middle of a tango. Roughly the policeman

shoved the two women forward by putting his hands between their shoulder blades and as he pushed them, the shackles dug deep into their bare flesh around their ankles and wrists.

Sitting on two chairs in the middle of the clearing were two male figures with stacks of geraniums on their heads. None of the dancers could get near them because an emerald-green canopy had been planted in the earth in order to cover the two. One of the men had his face painted white, with dark black circles under his eyes. Other than this detail, they were dressed identically in red conquistador military jackets with white tassels on the shoulders set in gold. They were both seated simply upon two wooden thrones that had been decorated with fuschia and lemon ribbons. They wore red trousers that had a stripe of white lace drawing the outside leg and were wearing white gloves. The painted man held a riding switch in his left hand and they both wore oriental sandals on their feet that showed their toenails painted in red. In awe, the policeman and his driver fell back.

“Thank goodness,” began Crystal, “that we have chanced upon an authority!”

The man without white makeup said, “I have been waiting for you. But not you in particular, someone polite. If you can’t be rich, at least be polite!”

His companions’ eyes filled with tears and his expression did not change as they streamed down his face, making tracks in the dark charcoal make-up.

The tired princely figure spoke to no one in particular, “Take these women away with the others to the places in the sea.”

“But what will become of us in the sea, sir?” Crystal asked and received a sharp slap across her face by the short policeman.

“How shall we live?”

The short policeman and the burly driver pulled them to the side and produced each a lasso with which they proceeded to capture the hovering people and walked along nonchalantly, as if holding a bunch of helium-filled balloons. More police vans started to arrive, and each one of them held a lasso of dancers and acrobats, musicians and singers. Crystal and Ahurewa were made to walk in front and the loudspeaker said ‘Forward!’

Progress was tedious and painful, blood was dripping from the two women's ankles from the hardened diamond shards that were designed as a kind of torture device. None of the people had any idea why their bodies had suddenly become weightless. If any of them began to lag behind, the policemen would follow suit, slowing their own pace. Each and every one of the eight policemen cursed the entire way and talked loudly to each other in coarse fashion. As they walked one of the burliest policemen threw cards on the ground that were playing cards but instead bore images of naked women in provocative poses, releasing them by a deft flick of the thumb and forefinger of the hand that was not holding on to the lasso. Crystal collapsed and her shackles were released so that she could be lassoed. Only Ahurewa did not cry out, she was too angry to talk or even to look at anyone else, beside Miss Manner.

They finally arrived at the shore. Waiting for them were an amalgamation of enlarged play-houses. The play-houses varied in size. Some had two stories but in some the stairs were too tiny for a person to feasibly walk on them and in some the stairs were too tall to mount without at least a little difficulty. All of the houses had chimneys and in front of the houses was a small porch on which were placed one fishing rod. The bottom of the play-houses was made of rubber and the houses themselves covered in a kind of genetically modified oil mixed in with the paint so that the houses would not erode in the sea. The people were yanked down to the ground and thrown one by one into the houses: gold-yellow houses, emerald-green houses, pearly-white houses while some were sapphire-blue and all were bobbing merrily in the water.

A man in a charcoal suit stepped forward and said, "Under the Article 6.9 each of you is under arrest for disturbance and menace to society. Henceforth you will remain in these houses – or into the air itself, goodness only knows where. That is your business, not the business of the state or of the sovereign England. You are forthwith stateless for a period of no less than two years in the provided facilities. Any resistance to being placed in one of the provided facilities will result in burning."

The lassoed people had very little desire to resist, but at the same time were vocal about their displeasure and the injustice of separating them from their lives, their friends and family,

just because of their love of music, it was an outrage. The lack of gravity that they suffered from hadn't been brought about through some action of their own, after all! The policemen dutifully set about taking each prisoner, one by one, into the coloured houses that were bobbing on the water. Three sisters were very cross about being man-handled and so their capture had to be realised under supervision of the renegade police. The woman in the peacock-cape absolutely refused to be brought down, and kicked proudly against two policemen until being squashed into one of the tangerine-orange houses. Crystal and Ahurewa were placed in separate houses, Crystal pleading and tossing her head in annoyance when Ahurewa was dragged away out of her arms and shoved into a bright yellow house, as she herself had been taken at the same time and thrown inside one of the pearl-white houses. Night had just begun to fall and the winds were rising.

The next day Ahurewa was woken by a sound that she had never heard. It was like a hundred cats squabbling. For a moment the young girl did not know where she was. The unexpected movement of the sea underneath the small floating house combined with the high-pitched screeching noise made her feel terribly nauseous. Ahurewa struggled to her feet and in a few steps was at her "front door". She noticed that unlike yesterday, she had gained gravity again somehow. The rocking motion of the waves underneath her made her wish that the opposite was the case. Ahurewa very much would have liked to have been able to up and float away from the predicament she found herself in. The whole construction was mounted on rubber and when she opened the "door" she noticed that she was only around six feet away from the churning sea.

She looked up to see where the strange sound from minutes before was coming from and she saw the woman in the cape that looked as though it were made of peacock feathers, singing some plaintive chant for all she was worth. The woman was such a dreadful singer that Ahurewa began to laugh. She started to call out for Miss Manner who she could not see. What colour was her house? She couldn't remember. At least she was able to stand normally

on the ground. Perhaps this was the first sign of things returning to normal. Just then she felt something grip her ankle. Ahurewa fell backwards, screaming.

“Settle yourself, my girl!” said the owner of the hand that had gripped her ankle. Then he said something that Ahurewa did not understand, “E kore ahau e kino ki a koe.” The strange words belonged to a corpulent and hairy man who had jumped into the water. “I am not going to hurt you, I am only searching the area, introducing myself. If you happen to see a rainbow-coloured blow-fish with a long green tail, I would be most grateful if you could spear him at once and let me know. Here’s something to help!” The hairy man threw a spear into her house and Ahurewa shouted again as she dodged it, having to nestle herself up against the little house’s walls. The man swam away.

The full realization of her situation started to dawn on Ahurewa. Not only was she at sea in a floating house, but she was surrounded by people who spoke a language she did not understand. Considering these two factors, it would take everything that she was capable of in order to stay alive. For the moment, she would have to find Miss Manner. Ahurewa drew herself a glass of water from the water bottles that had been packed into numerous cupboards. There was very little “interior design” details in the small floating houses. Apart from the colour painted on the outside of the house, they were identical. The ‘houses’ were one large room, like a bedsit, and the lavatories were long drops into the sea. The ‘kitchen’ consisted of a cooker that ran on solar energy, meaning that food would have to be cooked throughout the day as there could be no cooking at night. Ahurewa had a vision of all of the crazy people she had been stuck here with being very nice indeed and they would swim to each other’s houses to visit. The caterwauling had died down and as Ahurewa looked out of her front door, she saw the heavy-set man talking earnestly to the peacock-cape covered woman. She is tall and has a pensive look, and wears a glittering grey gown. The man is making her laugh and it strikes Ahurewa that the peacock woman is dignified and elegant, and could not possibly be mixed up in any sort of criminal activity, as she knew she herself and her teacher Miss Manner could not be involved in any way in the Dancing Plague that had affected big business all over the country of New Zealand .

About fifty feet away Ahurewa could see an emerald-green painted boat that its inhabitant had made himself a hammock at the front of his “house”. He was lying in it, and was staring at the sky. He noticed the girl and waved to her and Ahurewa waved back. She sat down on the floor of the floating house and began to think of the immediate practical problem, besides finding Miss Manner. If only there was a way that all of the houses could be joined together, like groups of kayakers will join oars in order to stay together as one unit. Then she heard another noise. It was of a child crying and a sapphire-blue house appeared to be but thirty feet from Ahurewa. Miss Manner was standing there, dripping wet in all of her clothes, reassuring the child that everything was going to be fine, they would survive by themselves. She must have swum to the child’s house, Ahurewa thought.

“Miss Manner!” she called. “Miss Manner!”

The young woman looked all about her until finally her eyes rested on Ahurewa’s own. When she spotted her she appeared so surprised that she almost fell, holding the little child, into the water. “Be careful, Miss Manner!” she cried. She remembered that the burly man who had thrown in the spear to Ahurewa’s house seemed to be all in one piece, but swimming from house to house was a dangerous risk that Ahurewa for one, would not take. If she could see the big man again though, she would ask him to run errands for her, communication errands. For the moment she had to sit and think.

She sat on top of her bed bunk, tapping the spear absent-mindedly on the ground.

“Hello? Hey, girl!” came a voice. She went to the “door” and opened it. The big man was back in front of her house, going around in little circles on his back. He wore no shirt and his great stomach shook and heaved in the water. Hair covered his chest and when he held out his hand to be hoisted up into her house she noticed that his hands were hairy too.

“Thank you, girlie,” the hairy man said, as he launched himself into her “house”. Ahurewa passed him a towel from the rack on the wall which he used to roughly wipe his face and shoulders. There was barely room to take more than a few steps in the “houses”. The large man stood there, dripping, he was wearing pants that he had roughly cut into shorts.

“Ko Harata taku ingoa. I’m Harata,” the big man said, sticking out his hand for Ahurewa to shake, which she did.

“I’m Ahurewa. Do you know why we’re here?”

The large man squinted and said, “Well, we’ve been accused.”

“Accused of what?”

Here the big man laughed kindly and answered, “Inciting a public disturbance.”

Ahurewa’s mind went blank. She and Miss Manner had never plotted to cause any sort of trouble, least of all to publicly embarrass themselves to the point of getting arrested and literally disposed of in the ocean for who knows how long? Until they died?

Harata rubbed the towel through his hair and explained further.

“I’m a retired general. I have had nothing to do with the Dancing Plague that started off in the capital. Did you know about it?”

Ahurewa shook her head ‘no’.

“I’ve got some family that live in the capital,” the man said, seating himself on the ground by the door. Ahurewa forced herself to look away from the water moving behind him, as she was feeling slightly dizzy. It was difficult to listen to Harata but if she didn’t listen then she would panic and she wanted to avoid panicking at all costs.

“Of course, if you’re like me then, well, you’ve been framed, we all have.”

Here the large man swept his right arm, indicating the other houses bobbing in the water.

“And it depends on something that we cannot help at all,” the man said, looking up at Ahurewa earnestly. “We’re Māori .”

Ahurewa felt her cheeks flame.

“So?”

“So, girlie, because we only make up fourteen per cent of the population, they think they can use this national crisis of the Dancing Plague in order to get rid of us Māori once and for all.”

Ahurewa shivered as she thought about the ocean outside. For the first time she considered the fact that there were probably sharks swimming outside her “door”. Could a government really do such a thing? Why?

“Used your fishing rod yet, Ahurewa?”

She had not used the fishing rod. She shook her head no.

“Good,” he said, “because we’re going to need all the twine we can to join up our group.”

Harata pulled out her fishing rod and proceeded to draw all of the twine out of it. He pulled out a mass of twine from his pant pockets and instructed her to follow his lead. He began to join one piece of twine to another by making small knots. Before long, they had created one large piece of twine that was almost unbreakable. Harata said that they would start with her house as number one, and he would fasten the twine on the outside of the houses ending with his own house, so that he could control the tautness of the twine and so pull all of the houses together. He waved a cheery goodbye to Ahurewa and plunged into the water, holding his long line of twine. She would never see him again. Ahurewa watched helpless as a group of sharks made a bee-line for Harata and then swam away again.

When the men flew a helicopter down to see the group and to count the dead they were astonished to find the people not only intact, but strangely able to bind themselves together as a force against them. Ahurewa had jumped into the water and rescued the line of twine, risking her life. From Harata’s house they had secured a fishing net that they used to catch fish for their sustenance. They brought no reply to the authorities’ demands to disband and attacked any officers that came into their vicinity.

Even today, though it has been over fourteen years since the Ball-room Dancing Plague, somewhere in the South Pacific ocean there are twenty small floating houses. Their inhabitants are fine people and their small society is an example of an alternative to modern-day capitalism – subsequently, Ministry of Justice officials have chosen to ignore their existence. Claims such as Harata’s are yet to be confirmed, although each member of

this group is of Māori descent. The Ball-room Dancing Plague was a rumoured convenient subterfuge to a group of renegade police officers.

Postscript: D. was not re-elected, restoring hope to the people.

W. knew nothing about the activities associated with the Ball-room Dancing Plague.

Sweet Nicky

Wee little free winky wiles twenty elvin monkeys rode the back train bouncing they shook ivy and snare drum maracas to reveal the gap in the woods where she was. It was a blerry parade for a who-do bazoo, daggered laughter a joy with my girl caught in candles and knife noises in rustling skirts and only one to hold him by, to stay his hand. That is what happened, I've answered it at last, a shadow of something hot something victorious without flaying whips or hard leather covering panting horses no I saw flaming torches, one at her feet and one at her head. I saw her lying there and the next thing I saw was his owl. It swooped over her head and nestled in the cedar tree. There was Luke in the shadow beating a drum. Mira was absent, ingesting snakes and thinking of him walking up and down in the earth. A catafalque where my girl lay, not yet dead, still not gone even when that owl went over head with the night sky behind it all red then it was I saw her smile because handsome boy gave a dream to her in pills.

It was night. There was a wind that ruffled up the pungent smell of cut grass. She was lying on a table, skinny body naked under the sheet with the left eye bruised, her head slack lolling there. Arms and legs were not tied to the table but it was safe she was too punched up to move her pink tongue trying to moisten her cracked lips a hint of teeth making a dent into the lower lip. And those noises that issued forth from her, a garbled sense of all that had gone wrong in her life, the innocence slaughtered slowly over time, to reach this last act this performance. If there was a word for the picture of her there as she was then, if I could wash my hands of her after this what the girl could have said so many time before – she didn't say it – was *leave* I would have gone no he would have gone the lips cover into an O shape before the idea ends that this was ever a human mouth with teeth and words and the impetus to express and instead becomes a fish pucker caught in a nitrogen flash.

That weak smile as the owl's poison claws scrape her temples, our young king's signal.

There's a hunting tune with five horns that play and a stag's hooves charge the beaten ground, behold a rightful prince in cerise armour and pearls. He was as like a light radiating adolescent sex. If only that other one were here to see him but as it was there only sat one apostle and one of me. It was lovely how he came out so proud. Dance, night, and all hail, for this one hath not child nor blood but speed. Luke pauses his drumming to admire his liege's tanned skin, the way that his hair curls just so under the pine needle garland while the prince looks at the leaves. All his life he has noticed that the leaves have moved as if welcoming him when he walked, shimmering yellow and emerald but before he would have passed over them in a stutter. Now could he feel his full glory.

The torch light falls on his fine cheekbones, his muscular arms shining with sweat, faintly a noise not expected maybe rats squeal and chatter then scamper up trees but I can't be sure he walks barefoot with ceremony, plucking his careful steps and the sounds of the rats chattering, if so they chatter, is silenced, stopped. My girl's eyes are closed now but she senses that he is near because she starts to moan and even now I think that she moaned with lust. That she would forgive all of it if only he would lift her into his arms and kiss her head, they could lie naked in the forest fat hares could come sniffing, he would talk about stars arrested, she would suck him, he would tell her how lost she was. I see her right foot fall inwards, a last attempt at protection of her lower body. Holding court by the bonfire built in honour of the waterfall, in the days when we were almost friends, I knew him as a beautiful Marquis with a sorry bag of riddles and nothing more. I didn't know he could go this far and my awful self hiding behind the tree.

There was no core hymen left to break as she lay there. Nicky girl hadn't saved herself but she had given herself to him in love and in her sanity. The lion stretched his body it was time for him to come now but this rod only appeared for self-pleasure and not that kind. With hubris his urine streamed hard straight into a cadaver and him moving backwards to blast her body up and down. Jamboree! Her eyelids flutter and that Luke can't keep himself from salivating. But the warmth, no, is there that to come? It's for no one but the cold one see that corpse melting pretty and his pure metal flowing

free? The bull is lowed with horns for the hole and the square to meet. This is something that has been going on for all time. Past it there's a new depth neutral to shatter all this garble but a fat jolly genie grants his snap-wish. There *are* his goals to consider, to take my girl's pluck, make her unsure, sweat her nose up, oh come on shake it just shake it shake the lichen-covered spheres. My eyes fix on the possibility of flames beneath the white pink billows of skirt. Stop.

Handsome as the light not yet existent I know, the lapping which will sizzle into her, then be sprayed again by urine, the light will be snuffed from underneath her back, we're on the final spin, he instructs Luke to act. Lascivious has gathered balls of paper kept in a knapsack thrown to the birches, he leaps to the bag and produces his offering, places more paper on the ground, with bundles of twigs held in place under his arms. Our man stretches out his toes into a duck form, quawking *who would have thought a man so selected could have left a crab open for the score. These charms regretted oh...*the curved muscles around his knee and his brown silky hair messed up like a savage. Luke has placed the paper underneath her pedestal and there is no reaction from the girl. Careful as a poor boy Luke unwraps his bundles and scatters them over the paper. His pink cheeks are stretched in a smile, showing the fatness there and delight uncensored, while his body is hunched and rolls of fat around his hips and stomach are revealed without shame by his silk shirt borrowed from his friend now, his friend. Our man turns his hands gently in the air, eyes fixed as if entranced, his fingers emerge gnarled from the limp wheeling hands. Luke hoots for the flame but this is Prince's job. The owl has disappeared into the birches, and perhaps even beyond them into the pines that sit in a huff, immoveable to right action and all bored to the teeth but a small box arcs from Luke's hand and is snatched out of the air. The prince's pride as he looks to the left and to the right for more cheers and observers to this benevolence of his disgust for her turned to pity. I fall down. Quietly the prince strikes a match and his face is briefly illuminated, an expression of trust not convoluted by thoughts or time. The flame he snuffs has disappeared quietly and the smell of Sulphur can be imagined in four will-o-wisp dreams because in reverence he kneels in front of her and makes a cross on her forehead as if in marriage. She turns her head toward him and her mouth moves in pleading joy while he nods

his head. They will converse in eternity and I kiss the air that pushes his head downwards as he listens to her now with chagrin.

Then, *fire*.

Nicky screams as the flames combust, a crackle of saplings born on the wind haloo brain child wake up now, rocking on my toes, my legs too heavy for all of this, no, there was a grey bird, there was corpulence and to the death you'll find the will to deny Nicky's sheet billowing, planks of wood nailed to the outside of the sheets jumping her body full of electricity, all the gangplay stories that anyone has ever heard, a guy of martyr, a swift spray of fireworks resplendent as I stand up. Luke has something else to offer. He runs around the black smoke and hurriedly offers a shield to his master, a sarcophagus, thick polished Balinese mask. In his swinging hand covered in a hawking glove a net made of crystals he throws over her face to have her beautiful once more. He puts one arm around Luke whose face is blank with innocence and they walk in my direction. Luke puts his nose in the air and they stop, twenty paces away, like the wolf in the fairy-tale. Tears of joy run down the prince's face. My back is to them now and I know that this is right to be gone as well. Their slow steps toward the tree before our man starts to sing again, *To the silver birches for the bird, to the merry lane we go tripping*.

Once I cannot hear them anymore I grip onto the tree and look around at my girl. She is half gone. I go down on all fours and the stones dig into my hands and knees but there is a girl none of this was lies, God was right in his elation for humankind all along. They hadn't counted on the fire not being strong enough to penetrate the wood. I see their pitiful fire has subsided and her face, mixed with purple, has warped but thank mercy it was only the awful knowledge of the flames, the smoke and his disgust that wrecked her, she was still alive. I pull at her body, my hands around her waist, the backs of her arms are burnt to sticky scraps of skin and cling to the wood.

I was running the halls of that concrete house when she left me the first time. There was nothing to do but go and find her. The warren was filth and blue, in its foyer a lame hyena chomped on flies. Worn brown carpet of rancid hair, clouds of onion cooking, wheel of fortune playing to packed houses

in hysterics. A pock-marked man playing a clarinet to three drunk women, next door to them a red-haired child furiously pushing reams of canvas through a sewing machine, in the next room a man crying. The further I went, perhaps going around in circles, no one stopped me and only a sickly whimsy attempted to as she stood at her door and blew cigarette smoke suspiciously.

But I found her man's hovel because I heard her whispering. Deep inside her down in the room, down in the cavern, there are accents of hers prolific. There had to be a space of opportunity but no it was just today. This time. Not the worst never the worst again. Where had I so disintegrated that in my throat the bark is absent and salty my eyes all bleary, I'm searching for another voice in the dark that announces it's not really her after all. How could I choose to be such a coward for sadness's sake? Deeper shame strains up the door she is playing behind, it's a cheap refuge inset with two small windows in opposing corners. Oh the two of them were fast!

for the thing was dead latched. I tried to imagine the man's contorted face, his teeth, or his haunches to remove me from knowing but he remains a stranger. Some stranger looking hungry found her crazy and light in bed but she's too clever to be saved that little spark latching doors who carries on quiet leaving me mute and belly-up broken in a lone hallway softly knocking.

She could have changed me for the worst it would have done me good to go from lion to child. Hello shri god drishna! fancy having an interest in this ignorant disciple released from caves! Thank you for the vision my good Mary come to save us. She was alive, the silly thing. To have sat there with my face hot, reduced to be an observer to her monarch butterflies turning aflame and incandescent. Blackened face in vino veritas or was it col tempo by love. To have let her slender hand grip my neck to make that appendage, to create the nose of a dog, that was me, shamed to those vomits and blood clots from the babies unasked of god yet he still wants all of them fruit of her loins jumbled punctured and perfumed, all this can't be evaporated, not the monuments of sphinxes and yangtzes, gifts from Paris to the Americas thank you darling pieces of us there together in a shambles. It's all past and thank heaven I knew there was a relief there somewhere in my chest where I had put all of happiness and loving the screwing on her behalf all of the tendering tottle-dell breadcrumbs wherever I could

get, whenever I had no character to rumble and spit, when I was stuck too but not held. Thank heaven for all those screams deaf to the disaster tsunamis, vacant to the strident Chinese legs, wooden Russian pain proud down to the dregs, get loose, take Versailles champagne in a paper cup. Only mouth to mouth and pumping at her chest. Sweet. She was blonde. She is blonde. She matched him to the march leaving all flowers not hybrids of belfries in the bells that atone together blowing those maroon capes up and so ready to answer. And now this, which she hadn't asked for.

The flames you have created. Your painting of her no longer affixed to them. The light afraid of you. Shivering though the ashes were warm still. And a plethora of jewels is released into the coal.

Part II: Laura Riding and Ecstatic Exits

“We ran as if to meet the moon.”

Robert Frost, “Going for Water”

Laura Riding’s Absolute Exits in *Progress of Stories* (1935)

As noted in the introduction, Jacques Derrida aptly defines *ek-stasis* as *une sortie hors de soi* [an exit out of oneself]. We may interpret the ecstatic moment or ecstatic event-time as enacting an exit; as her fiction demonstrates, Laura Riding is a writer who is recurrently concerned with representing such disappearances. In the case of Riding’s story “The Story-Pig”, the absolute exit is achieved most magnificently by the Story-pig object, both from its fictional place (the hotel) and from the story itself. This disappearance is attained in an entirely anticlimactic way, as I will demonstrate. In addition to such apophatic plot effects, Riding’s fictions, in “The Story-Pig” and elsewhere in her work, demonstrate tone and syntax that are particularly ecstatic. Her narrative addresses are at times ironic, at times playful, almost never with normative or explicit emotional or sentimental language. It is a style of narration that results in a kind of overall fantastic-philosophic *ecstasis*.

Riding was an American and Trans-Atlantic poet, essayist, short story writer and critic, particularly active in the 1920s and 1930s (afterwards going quiet until resurfacing in the late 1960s). Her fictions deal with story-place and story-time in a series of approaches that are both highly original and also tending toward self-combustion. An author who performed her own particular kind of self-reflexive and quasi-surrealist ecstatic writing and episodes in her narratives, Riding also advances the idea that such literature – what this study is calling *ecstatic literature* – exists in a multifarious set of matrices that she engages with in order to question and subvert normative literary ideas about reality, time and being. She believed in an anti-social state of being, especially in poetry, although she also saw that state as achievable in all kinds of creative literary production.

Riding saw poetry as the ultimate genre, superior to all others, yet paradoxically most oriented toward a “failure” whose “vacuum” sounds much like the ecstatic. Riding perceived and represented in both poetry and narrative the idea of “the individual unreal” as being the only vehicle by which one can truly perceive the world as it “really is”. In her essay “What is a poem?” Riding writes,

[i]t is not an effect (common or uncommon) of experience; it is the result of an ability to create a vacuum in experience – it is a vacuum and therefore nothing. It cannot be looked at, heard, touched or read because it is a vacuum...Since it is a vacuum it cannot be reproduced in an audience.... If it were possible to reproduce it in an audience the result would be the destruction of the audience.³¹

Riding’s “vacuum in experience” can be read as another direction for the exit of ecstasy as it is theorised by Derrida. David Farrell Krell writes about Derrida’s explorations of the themes of history, natality and ecstasy and notes the effort made by Derrida to write about “ecstatic time”:

[i]f the present is dissimulation, then all manifestation, the very truth of being...becomes ‘withdrawal of an origin that never possessed a present phenomenality’....[t]his in turn implies ‘an absolute exit, a radical ek-stasis, originary and without return’ (*une sortie absolue, un ekstase radicale, originaire et sans retour*).³²

In fictional terms, such *ecstasis* is ultimately concerned with achieving, through various narrative representations, a manifestation of an “absolute exit” out of the self. In Riding’s

³¹ Laura Riding, *Anarchism Is Not Enough*. Lisa Samuels (ed.), *op. cit.*, p 16.

³² David Farrell Krell, “History, Natality, Ecstasy: Derrida’s First Seminar on Heidegger, 1964-1965”, *op. cit.*, p 10.

case, such moments occur when for example the Story-pig object skips off to the moon; for this chapter, such a moment is when ecstatic exit is achieved.

This enquiry does not investigate the topic of time proper, but ‘event-time’ in narrative is a point that is emphasised in the following analyses. Event-time refers to the moment when a supposed fictional event takes place; with the inclusion of such events, a story can be seen to have a beginning, a middle and an ending. Riding subverts the idea of portraying a stable psychological narrative time-sense that progresses from one day and one year to another in preference for depicting an ecstatic event-time. Moments and successive moments of hesitation or suspension conclude in unexpected and unpredictable exists out of indeterminate locales. Riding’s ecstatic writing achieves a temporary “absolute exit of the self” through apophatic techniques and devise that apply to both story objects and story temporality.

In the fantastical fairy-tales-for-adults that constitute her collection *Progress of Stories*, Riding consistently presents in a tone that is proud yet quaint and narratives that are rigorously “un-real” in their diegesis. She ultimately wanted to inspire others to write from their peculiar own point of view and through their own subjectivity, as she had done through her works (although this study does not enter into various collaborations and inspirations that her approaches helped along). Like the Queen in “The Story-Pig”, Riding idealised a resistant approach to fabulation, insisting on not being imitated as well as not imitating oneself, and on continually rejuvenating one’s thinking, reading and creative faculties. As Lisa Samuels notes in “Creating Criticism”,

[Riding] wants to make language the material key to a dialogue of unreality.... A truly creative production is “discharged from the individual, it is self; not *his* self, but self. Indeed, “so thoroughly ‘unselfish’ is the character of the unreal self that its just

conclusion is a sort of social disappearance. A seeming paradox of her belief in ‘social disappearance’ is that Riding wants the creative act to generate other creative acts....an incentive not to response but to initiative.³³

While operating within ideas of disappearing, a kind of complete non-attachment, Riding wants to create readers who are able to operate within contradiction and antimony.

Riding’s later years include an ambitious and somewhat abstruse project entitled *Rational Meaning* in which all words are defined “once and for all”, as well as an almost twenty-five-year hiatus from writing. Her writing hiatus seems to mirror in life what Riding has herself lightly and not-so-lightly thought about at length, for the the end of *Anarchism Is Not Enough* there is a “Letter of Abdication” in which the Queen-like narrator berates the reader, “[y]ou would not understand that only truly abandoned boldness breeds truly abandoned decorum....You begin with contradictions instead of ending with them; efface them instead of developing them.”³⁴ The point I am making here is that throughout Riding’s works one encounters instances of other realities or other times, abdications and re-beginnings and simultaneous contradictions, such as will be described in the case of the appearance of the Go-cart and also the scene with Hans and the sleeping lady toward the end of the story “The Story-Pig”. Riding’s version of the Derridean exit from the self is an exit from social control and habit replication in literature.

Riding’s short story publication began in her 1928 book *Anarchism Is Not Enough*, an assortment of myths, essays and short stories, and peaks in the achievement of *Progress of Stories*. In *Anarchism Is Not Enough*, the narrator states toward the end of the Letter, “You know only how to be either heroes or cowards. But you do not know how to outwit

³³ Lisa Samuels (ed.) in ‘Creating Criticism’, critical introduction to Laura Riding, *Anarchism Is Not Enough*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001, pp xxviii-xxix.

³⁴ Laura Riding in ‘Letter of Abdication’, *Anarchism Is Not Enough*, *op. cit.*, p 217.

yourselves by being neither, though seeming to be both. ‘What,’ you say indignantly, ‘would you have us be nothing?’ Ah, my dear people, if you could you would all shortly become Queens. But perhaps it is best that you cannot.”³⁵ The tone of close familiarity with the reader is carried out in what I have called a quaint-sceptical tone. Sometimes this narratorial address loops the reader into the story, for example in “The Story-Pig” implicitly grouping the reader together with the hotel guests, whose eyes are depicted as being just slightly open in reading the story, “their eyes open just a slit, enough to look at themselves from a long distance as if it had all happened long long ago.”

As a collection, *Progress of Stories* is grouped according to such categories as “Stories of Lives” and “Stories of Ideas” together with unfinished fragments that form an early and yet significant part of the author’s *oeuvre*. “The Story-Pig” is taken from the third out of four parts in *Progress of Stories*, namely “Nearly-True Stories”. The ecstatic themes present in “The Story-Pig” can be applied to other stories in the collection *Progress of Stories*³⁶ especially in the feature of setting as being synonymous with *khora* or the “no-place place”.

The section before “The Story-Pig”, titled ‘Stories of Ideas’, introduces this *khora* vividly. “Reality as Port Huntlady” (hereafter “RAPH”) features a group of people who go to a place called Port Huntlady which, from the outset, is a decidedly *khora*-type place: “[i]t was rather like a place where one felt a town might one day be, or where one felt that perhaps there had once been a town” (“RAPH”, p 86). Of course, Riding does not specify what these “important things” are, making Port Huntlady appear to be a kind of existential vortex of a place, where every effort is eventually abandoned: “there were carpenters and masons in Port

³⁵ *ibid.*, p 224.

³⁶ The two additional stories examined here are “Reality as Port Huntlady” and “Miss Banquett, or The Populating of Cosmania” and together make up ‘Section II: Stories of Ideas’ (pp 85-165).

Huntlady who came and went as the people came and went...in going away people left many of their possessions behind” (“RAPH”, p 88). When the temporary residents resolve to leave Port Huntlady “after a sudden tragicseeming decision that they were not equal to the spiritual demands their exile made on them” (“RAPH”, pp 88-89) they never returned. The only permanent residents are Lady Port-Huntlady, who owns extensive properties, and Cards, her somewhat dubious business partner. The character of Lady Port-Huntlady is similarly enigmatic and appears to do very little except for “presiding over” the doings and non-doings of Port Huntlady. Her character is described in an apophatic way by Riding, “looking like a permanent invalid who had evaded the mortal toll of illness by dying inwardly, remaining outwardly alive – not large, not small, not young, not old, not beautiful, not ugly, not particularly anything, and yet so decidedly *there?*” (“RAPH”, p 91). Events in the story unfold according to a series of anti-climactic moments, such as the “accidental death” of the character Tomatoes, which even the police do not seem to be that concerned about, “the Port Huntlady police refused to regard Tomatoes’s death as a public event: it was his own affair” (“RAPH”, p 114). The quasi-humorous and understated manner in which deaths and even suicide are referred to throughout the story combine weight and lightness; the immovability of death juxtaposed with the impression that “none of it really matters” is a distinctly Riding-like effect.

In the story “Miss Banquett, or The Populating of Cosmania” (hereafter “Miss Banquett”) the reader is again able to interact with such ideas as the *khora*-place and eventful non-event in fiction. In “Miss Banquett”, the main character, Miss Banquett, sets off to prove her “beauty” to the world. She becomes shipwrecked, and the *khora*-place no-place that she finds herself in is unpopulated. She then takes it upon herself to populate “Cosmania”. In a way that finds echoes in the biblical story of Genesis, Miss Banquett aims to “order things” over seven days, “it was an arrangement of them not according to their existence, but rather

according to their non-existence – not according to their disorder, but rather according to how they came into her head (MB, p 135). The text goes on to describe how Miss Banquett, out of a “fear of uncertainty” creates the heavens and the earth, and the people in it, while taking the seventh day as a “day of rest”. She then decides to visit each of the worlds that she has created within Cosmania, “[s]he went first among her black people” (p 138), “next among her yellow people” (p 139), “the cloudy people” (p 143), the “cold people” or Sister Snow and her associates (p 145), “next she went among her blue people” (p 149) and then to the people who were associated with the “economical side of her beauty...the white people” (p 152). Finally, she comes to the place of the fire people (p 156). In each of the transitions between worlds Miss Banquett finds herself in a new blank space: “ ‘Oh lolly, lolly, lolly-o’, at this moment arose all around Miss Banquett. It was a numerous but not disorderly crowd sitting at her feet in an attitude of petition...She came to herself in a small snow-house (“MB” pp 143, 145). Meanwhile the content of these places is conjured out a complex desire-network exuding from her character: “Miss Banquett now led a very odd life – odd precisely because it was as she wished it” (p 149) and “[h]er desire for content and her desire for pleasure fanned each other into a single flame – a flame which did not burn and which was yet fire” (p 155). By placing her character Miss Banquett into a series of uncertain topographies of apophatic descriptions, Riding examines how ecstatic writing can indeed, make much out of nothing and through various cerebral gymnastics create a *tabula rasa* out of place in which multiple strange and improbable events can occur.

These events combine to give an effect of placing side by side the idea of a *noplace* next to a fully-fledged *world* in which anything can happen. “Reality as Port Huntlady” takes a fictive place where the worthy people come to live out their days. “Miss Banquett, or The Populating of Cosmania” engages with ideas of creation, ceaselessly ending and beginning again. “The Story-Pig intensifies these uncertainties and the uncertain matrices of different

character actions. It can certainly be seen as being evocative of a fairytale (for adults) and is apparently the most circumscribed and stable of the settings, with all of the events taking place under the roof of the Hotel Moon.

It's worth starting with a short summary of some aspects of "The Story-Pig" (hereafter "TSP"). The two central characters, Hans and Rose, are employees at a mysterious location called the Hotel Moon. These characters enact a kind of almost metaphysical romance, yet not even a friendship between the two is demonstrably depicted as happening in the 'real' world. The description of the country in which the narrative is situated is not supplied, nor is the reader told of the exterior appearance of the hotel. Through the repetition of certain words, such as the character names or the inanimate objects, including the Story-pig object sitting above the "unlit fireplace" and "feeling foolish", it becomes a story of how Hans transforms Rose into a queen "every night", nights during which, apparently, the hotel guests would also "tell one another thing...to increase their self-respect....words which turned into stories in the pig's shiny belly". The characters' physical appearances are not specified, not really given attention, rather there are broad statements made in place of externalisation: for Rose "was all respect...[r]espect was only the emotion of a hotel-maid" ("TSP" pp 170-171). There are always rather anonymous hotel guests who "squeeze their eyes shut" against the silver-golden half of reality for no reason other than, perhaps, that by doing so they "protect" themselves from some concepts that "upset their immediate happiness". The reader is informed at the outset that the anonymous and undescribed hotel guests would sit around the (always un-lit) fireplace in their fur coats in the evenings and tell "not exactly lies, but not exactly the truth" ("TSP", p 168). Their spoken words become fodder for the Story-pig object to fantastically "[gorge] itself on the idle thoughts of the guests...[which] turned to stories in the pig's shiny belly" ("TSP", p 167).

This fantastic-marvellous belly of the Story-pig has characteristics of limitlessness as well as being an entity that can constantly enact strange transformations. For it is in the belly that the “idle words” of the hotel guests (about whom, again, we are told only the barest detail: “[they] came to the Hotel Moon to behave nicely”) are turned into stories. This feature is not only a self-conscious device of writing itself; it is also an example of performing “designed waste”. Designed waste is an extraordinary technique characteristic of Riding, referenced without much explanation in *Anarchism Is Not Enough* but glossed by Samuels as a literary effect of excess, of potlatch and deliberate internal creative destruction. In designed waste, “no *thing* by itself is enough; no satisfaction is possible in the ongoing, desiring self; and our knowledge of the state of emptiness – of positive ‘nothing’, of the poetic ‘vacuum’ – suffices, is enough.... Only Nothing can be ‘a dancer walking the ruins’”.³⁷

The Story-pig object “tells stories over to itself all night” but is not at all concerned with, or even fully conscious of this generation of stories, abdicating responsibility for them, “if I talked nonsense last night, that’s my business”. In this way, the Story-pig object is refusing the reader further stories in order for ‘the story’ to continue. This apophatic device, later referred to as *aposiopesis*, is a ‘coming to a sudden halt’. Riding affects the reader’s conception of time when she employs this technique in “The Story-Pig”. The narrative literally begins to crumble, along with many other evocative disappearances such as the painting over the missing Story-pig object: “And what of the picture over the missing pig? For it had been found turned to the wall! And when it was turned back it was unmistakably faded” (“TSP”, p 183). This painting is of a ship “that so beautiful picture of the view from the hotel in moonlight, looking across the Valley of a Thousand Turns towards the sea, which seemed to say ‘Slowly, slowly!’ as it slowly bore the visible ship to an invisible Somewhere” (“TSP”, p 183). As with so many of the objects and events in “The Story-Pig”, designed

³⁷ *ibid.*, p lix.

waste swerves them out of narrative usefulness or bears them away. The painting shows a representation of a moving ship, as though the picture frame was a window into another reality where a ghostly ship moves through the waters, elongating the reader's impression of time passing, of inevitability and ceaseless motion. The sudden introduction of tidal waters into what is previously a story set inside a building with a brief journeying to an "elfin hillock" creates dynamism and movement within the story, echoing the transformations being made each night by the Story-pig object, Hans and Rose. Riding then goes on to further confirm that the story does not appear to be conducive to being read: "And here the story breaks off, for things were never the same again. In place of the Story-pig and the picture there now stood only a vase of fresh roses – always fresh, but always fading" ("TSP", p 184). Even the full hotel guests "told no more stories to one another, but sat talking of points of view and books and wars in far countries" ("TSP", p 184).

Important to the plot of the story – plot being a barely acknowledged obligation by Riding for the truthful author to provide, equally a modernist concern in representation to do away with plot – two incredible and invisible feats are achieved in the story: Hans turns Rose into the Queen and himself into a king (by virtue of being able to walk along beside her in the moonlight) and the Story-pig object ecstatically skips out of the window and into the moon which "promptly set". When this strange and happily improbable even finally occurs, "it *was* on the point of skipping off – and could not" ("TSP", p 177), it is an example of ecstatic technique because it contains inexplicable and excessive images of motion-achievement. The Story-pig object achieves "an absolute exit" both from the story and from the world as it is known. The strongest symbol in the story is the moon – for the moon is not only mentioned in many of its potential forms but also in its actual *ipse* toward the end, when the most extreme ecstatic moment occurs, namely the Story-pig object merging with the moon. The ecstatic exit of course happens at night, the 'magical time' of transformation, "[a]t night she

stepped into the beautiful picture that hung above the Story-pig, and down the stream of her true self she floated, a very invisible queen in a very visible ship” (“TSP”, p 171).

The Potentiality of Night

One of the most clear observations about Riding’s “The Story-Pig” is that most of the activity in the narrative is situated as happening or occurring at night: “[a]t night she stepped into the beautiful picture” (“TSP”, p 171); “[b]y night Hans saw the true mixture of the pathetic with the true. He saw the beautiful; he became the Sandman” (“TSP”, p 173); “they walked back in the moonlight, arm by arm” (“TSP” p 181); “the Queen walked straight into the absolute dark and out again, without having so much as a hair teased out of place” (“TSP, p 180). “The Story-Pig” is represented through the lens of narrating events that occur by the sight of the moon and not by the time dictated by the movement of the sun in the sky.

The antipathy to daylight also comes with Riding’s reference to shadows in “The Story-Pig” and the immediate personification of shadow as Death, who is described as the twin brother of the Sandman: “the Sandman...and...his twin brother Death, who worked along with him like a shadow” (“TSP”, p 175). Elsewhere Riding also expresses an antipathy toward daylight, stating, “that madman, the sun” (“TSP”, p 179). She also presents the Story-pig object as being (like the hotel guests) “[b]y night it was a sentimentalist, by day it was a snob.” (“TSP”, p 170).

The hotel guests perform their most interesting and integral action in the story at night, namely telling stories “every evening” and it is questioned how the day influences the guests behaviour, “[t]he Story-pig was responsible...for the way guests behaved by day – always nicely, no rudeness, no going deep into what anyone said or did” (“TSP”, p 170) implying that there exists another side to the hotel guests at night, or that there *could*

potentially exist other realities for the hotel guests at night, if only they would perhaps give such notions as there being a “silver half” and a “gold half” to reality, as Hans manages to achieve at night, “he became the Sandman; and Rose became the Queen, the *gold and silver* Queen” (“TSP”, p 173). It is also at night that inanimate objects become their real selves: “[a]nd the things in the discarded pieces of luggage became their true selves too” (“TSP” p 173).

The narrative of “The Story-Pig”, cloaked in shadow and mysterious images such as forests, the elfin hillock and moonlight opens a night-time space, and in doing so, can take somewhat more license in creating a dream-scape in the place of a *terra firma* day-time landscape. Distinct to ecstatic writing is the writer’s shying away from providing the reader with external descriptions in favour of mysterious and unstable settings, such as the painting above the fireplace and the shadowy Hotel Moon. Instead, the writer will examine over and over again, such notions as encountering ontological fluidity or even being able to perceive the *real* reality, itself unreal and anti-social in the sense that it aligned itself with a specific ecstatic style that reaches for a communication bent around silence.³⁸

As a fitting metaphor the reader can imagine time as presented by Riding as being a circle composed of two halves, night and day, represented by moonlight and fire (or in one example, the sun). If ecstatic literature tends toward expressing *apophatic* or ‘negative’ dialectics as opposed to *cataphatic* or ‘positive’ dialectics, then it may be expected that such apophatic modes are not restricted to setting the action at night, but that other devices are employed such as *aposiopesis* (which will be further explained), oxymoronic descriptions and

³⁸ Lisa Samuels in ‘Creating Criticism’, observes “[p]oetry needs to be kept out of what [Riding] later called ‘wisdom professions’ if it is to retain its value as an asocial force....the ‘individual-unreal’ is the place of highest seriousness for Riding.” (*op. cit.*, p xix).

a decidedly fluid approach to ontology – the inanimate objects are “dead, but they were also alive – exactly because they were dead...” (“TSP”, p 175).

Nocturnal time, invoking invisibility as it does, becomes an arena where everything and anything can happen. Riding expressly avoids any attempt at detailed descriptions of exteriors, whether that be descriptions of character’s appearances or of their surroundings. It is therefore appropriate that “The Story-Pig” should be found to be set against a backdrop of moonlight – moonlight itself being a barely perceptible source of light (for it is only visible because it reflects the light of the sun in reality) and therefore can reasonably be termed as a restriction on ‘ordinary’ vision. It could be said that Riding explores a kind of ‘un-real time’, one without seasons or even changes in weather, which is not described. Of course, it must also be noted that the night has long been associated with what Samuels has described as “amorphous and potential danger...or illicit activities”.³⁹ Authors typically use the night as backdrop to enhance the strange, the exotic or the erotic, from *Midsummer Night’s Dream* to magical realist writers, from Dostoevsky to Edgar Allan Poe. If images are, as Schultz has stated, “problematic for Riding”, then what is it she imparts to the reader instead? Because images, apophatic or cataphatic as they might be, certainly abound throughout the story.

The idea of progressive time is effectively subverted by Riding; an example of her ability to recreate the present tense over and over again, the quality that I am calling the everlasting present tense can be seen in the following quotation, “in another kind of today. And there were no yesterdays to that to-day. All the other to-days were not merely long, long ago; one could not credit them with having been at all” (“TSP”, p 175). The hotel guests “by night, their eyes, the eyes of the universal soul which they all shared, opened ever so little, the breadth of a money-slit, or a story-slit, we should say – just long enough to look

³⁹ Quote taken from a conversation between myself and Lisa Samuels on March 28th, 2019.

indulgently at themselves from a long, long distance and forgive themselves their vanities, as if it had happened long, long ago” (“TSP”, p 170). Here ‘long, long ago’, providing a measurement of never-ending time accentuates the “un-real” feel to the tone of the narrative and while evoking images of *khora* is another example of Riding’s apophatic treatment of time and events in narrative. *Khora* or the ‘no-place’ is explored.

In ecstatic writing, time is unstable, unknown, people with how many as can be conjured yet not through mimetic representation, located in an unknowable *khora*. The literary critic Frank Kermode has described *khora* as

the place (which is not yet a place) or the receptacle (which is not a receptacle) in which the mimemes of the forms are impressed on matter; the ‘place’ that must therefore have been there already, in a ‘there’ outside time and becoming, “[t]he *khora* is something of which we have only a dreamlike sense....One must think of the *khora* as Dionysius thought of the good: as the formless which confers form.⁴⁰

The *khora* runs continually throughout Riding’s *Progress of Stories*, in particular, her short stories “Miss Banquett, or The Populating of Cosmania” and “Reality as Port Huntlady”. In “Miss Banquett” the story is reinvigorated over and over again by the strength of the “no-where”. Each new entrance and exit from one ‘world’ to another, from an imaginary place to a refused place, a no-place, “[a]nd while she slept the shining hill removed from her, and everything behind it. And she awoke along” (“MB”, p 142). The effect of using *khora*-type settings is to offer an alternative to domestic or bourgeois realism. The ecstatic aesthetic is to apophatically narrate, rather than to be didactic. In “Reality as Port Huntlady” we see evidence of an ironic treatment of *khora* as represented by the place ‘Port Huntlady’ as well as the titular character, ‘Lady Port-Huntlady’. Repetitions on the name and other

⁴⁰ Frank Kermode, “Endings, Continued” in *Languages of the Unsayable – The Play of Negativity in Literature and Literary Theory*. Sanford Budick and Wolfgang Iser (eds.). Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 1987, p 77.

characteristics, show the possibilities for ‘reality’ to be quite a frightening vision, an apocalypse of neutrality and commerce, in a sense. When I mention commerce, it is because Riding engages with ideas around ‘subtraction’ as well as exchange – her interest in her many ‘tenants’ is pecuniary only, perhaps; but it is possibly something mysterious as well about their own potential as human beings that only Lady Port-Huntlady can perceive. In the end, everyone disappoints Lady Port-Huntlady, but not in a melodramatic sense. Everyone, in the end turns out to be ‘not quite right’ ‘not quite suitable’ to live long-term at Port Huntlady and attend her tea-time in the afternoons.

A restriction on sight contributes to the strangeness of the *khora*, “[s]he smoothed out her skirt, ruffled by self-analysis, travel, and religion, and walked up and down in the dark for as long as she should remain undisturbed...” (“MB”, p 145). Such a *khora* exceeds notions of being. It is as though the narrator is in some kind of enclosure, or perhaps *in utero*, “[s]carcely any time at all could have passed, when Miss Banquett was suddenly seized by unknown hands and carried hurriedly through hard snow...” (“MB, p 145). Explorations of *khora* yield imaginary spaces that are revolving around ideas of absence.

My critical reading of Riding’s *khora* is based on a continual swerve that I theorise as ‘*apostrephein*’ (‘to turn away’) because the author creates an entirely new narratological device in the story. In a way, the story ‘turns away’ from itself in order to create small but seismic events. In “The Story-Pig”, the event which operates as a kind of ‘fissure’ in the story-fabric, an opportunity to see an entirely unexpected and even surreal image, is what the reader suddenly encounters the appearance of a mysterious Go-cart: “in general they were self-respecting, fair-minded people who agreed with the Go-cart that ‘Each one has his own particular value’” (“TSP”, p 169). Nowhere else is the Go-cart referred to again in the story, and so it can be deduced that its inclusion suggests a complex function, that of creating a nowhere place where a Go-cart is speeding round and round in a clock-wise direction, itself

representing the idea of time. But time arrested, time ‘named’ and time as circular. Similarly, the painting hanging above the fireplace at the Hotel Moon is a mirror onto a different reality altogether, when things become “alive and very independent and talkative” (“TSP”, p 172). The critic Harry Mathews has written on Riding’s poetry and prose and states, “[w]hat she is confiding...is her own answer to a question that, as we have seen, runs through the entire book: How should one think about reality?”⁴¹ The animism employed by the personification of the loquacious objects also point to a reality beyond anthropomorphic world-views. Mathews writes about what he sees as Riding’s four tasks: “purifying language”, collaborating with the reader, “treating the entire objective world as a metaphor of human experience”, and turning that metaphor into another “metaphor of what cannot be believed or understood”⁴². Riding is treating the human world to a swerve into freedoms of the beyond-human. Indeed, later in this study I will show how her treatment of ‘reality’ supports a post-humanist reading of the possibilities of ecstatic writing.

This swerve of Riding’s fictions into the beyond-human is an example of what this study means by the concept of *apostrophein* as an ecstatic characteristic in narrative. Apostrophe is not being used in the normative sense that indicates possession. Rather, as Sanford Budick states, “[t]hroughout its long history the activity of apostrophe has remained close to its Greek etymology, *apostrophein*, to turn away. Apostrophe is different from other forms of direct address or from narrative digressions, because in apostrophe all preceding time and place are for an instant totally interrupted.”⁴³ An example of how it can be deduced that the technique of *apostrophein* is occurring is when Riding, in a previous part of the story, establishes *two* Hans figures, the character of Hans the doorman being more decidedly a

⁴¹ Harry Mathews, *Immeasurable Distances*. Venice, California: The Lapis Press, 1991, p 128.

⁴² *ibid.*, p 42.

⁴³ Sanford Budick. ‘Tradition in the Space of Negativity’, *op. cit.*, p 314.

different person to the king, who is able to talk to the Queen once Hans “went to bed himself” (“TSP”, p 182).

Toward the end of the story the narrator states that Hans “got up and said ‘Boo!’ to the Story-pig (right into its snout); and away it skipped out of the window and up to the moon and into it – at which the moon promptly set.” When the Story-pig disappears, it seems Hans goes as well: “And the strangest part of it all is that when this had happened the Queen found herself quite alone – the king had disappeared too.” (“TSP”, p 182). By implication Hans has shifted and multiplied identities yet again, in this passage. This is a good example of how Riding creates multiplicity out of the ontology of Hans as well as utilising the literary device of *apostrophe* in order to develop what I have identified as being ecstatic aims.

The Ever-lasting present tense and the Always Already

Time is vague and somewhat monotonous in the ‘foreground’ of life for Rose and Hans, just as days are presented in this fashion in the genre of fairy tale. Often the days pass monotonously until momentous events occur. In “The Story-Pig” references toward “the past” of the narrative occur but obliquely, such as the fact that Rose would give the Story-pig object “its proper cleaning at ten o’clock” or that she would shine it with particular effort every month. So we can deduce that ceremonial time, or repetitive time, effectively removing it and increasing it with dominance and importance – or conversely, the banality of repetition – is explored by Riding with her consistent musings on living, Death, human, heaven, things.

Ceremonial time is always evident throughout “The Story-Pig”, for events are described as *always* taking place: “as no fire ever burned”; “Hans would stand at the door listening to their stories, going out sometimes to look at the moon”; “then little by little the guests would come prattling downstairs”; “Rose gave it its proper cleaning at ten o’clock”;

“when the things in the discarded pieces of luggage became all hers – the pretty slippers and fans and lace handkerchiefs and scarves and storybooks”. The reader is urged to continue to watch the narrative unfold as if it were perhaps occurring in another reality, that of the ‘individual-unreal’ represented creatively: “let us follow the Queen home in the moonlight with Hans”. Using a directive to her reader as if the events are happening at the exact moment that the reader is reading the words of the story is an instance of the ever-lasting present tense being achieved and performed.

In addition to the ever-lasting present tense and ceremonial time, there are three events which occur distinctly in their own separate ellipses of time, and so challenge traditional notions of representing chronological time in narrative, namely: the appearance of the Go-cart, the sleeping woman, and the occurrence of the Story-pig object’s ability to ‘leap up into the moon’. Narratively speaking, we could say that the story has briefly, in these episodes, turned its back on itself in order to apprehend, see or describe some other kind of representation that is both diachronic in its achievement of being one narrative and then two (or more) narrative time-zones as well as anachronic. How, for example, does the “deeply sleeping woman” simultaneously “look hard at Hans as she went out the door”? In this way Riding explores time in narrative as being non-linear, and the text itself as being capable of opening up new fissures in the very fabric of the story.

Additive simultaneity and layering of time replace causality in this work. Events in “The Story-Pig” are referred to as ‘always’ occurring, and it is this unusual use of repetition and inevitability that gives rise to the feeling of the ever-lasting present tense that will just disappear at the story’s end, taking its story with in, “do you not see, my dears, that the scene has shifted?” (“TSP”, p 184). It can be surmised from close reading of the text of “The Story-Pig” that Riding uses repeated use of the word ‘and’ – giving an ancient and for-always tense that is almost biblical in its usage and effect. One need only take a glance at the last few

paragraphs of the story to note the repetitive use of the word ‘and’: “And here the story breaks off....And people behaved as nicely as ever....And Rose was not the same....And as for Hans....And as for the Queen, and the kind who walked beside her, and what the Queen’s shawl said to the sewing case” (“TSP”, pp 183-184). This kind of ecstatic temporality is an eruption of causality that also characterises the characters in “The Story-Pig”.

“The Story-Pig” is a text that is filled with silences and interiority. Certainly, both silence and interiority could be said to be “non-productive” in their operations. The Queen “never criticises”. The inanimate objects “prattle on” and yet only think things; they are never seen to talk aloud, although paradoxically, the narrator ironically informs us, “they would not help making sense” (“TSP”, p 170). Rose “didn’t dare to form an opinion” and Rose and Hans are not reported as having talked to each other in the story. Rather, Hans’ “eyes are in the right place” (“TSP”, p 171) and Rose-as-Queen and Hans-as-king are content to walk beside each other in the moonlight. Rose herself, while cleaning the Story-pig object completes this task “with a frown on her forehead as if to say, ‘no, brighter than that – and brighter than *that*’” rather than actually speaking the words reported. The Story-pig object “fancies to itself” and talks in the imaginary sense, like Rose, “with a gruff look on its face as if to say ‘If I talked nonsense last night, that’s my business’” (“TSP”, p 178). The Story-pig object would (obviously) not have been able to talk to anyone at all as all of the hotels guests as well as Rose and Hans have presumably gone up to their rooms to sleep while the Story-pig object is silently narrating its stories, gleaned from “the idle thoughts of the hotel guests”. The character of Rose is both in the story-time-place and in the painting-time-place, thereby effectively doubling character, time plus other-time and place plus other-place.

In place of causatives, the story moves by ceremonial compulsion as additive simultaneity; meanwhile, the layering of time also replaces causality. So, for instance, “ten o’clock” is “when Rose gave [the chimney corner its proper cleaning”, the morning is when

the hotel guests “would tease Hans” after coming prattling downstairs. The hotel guests, indeed, are the continual breakers of the silence throughout the story and they seem to be this way in order to avoid interiority, “no going deep into what anyone said or did” (“TSP”, p 171).

It has already been mentioned how much of the significant action happens at night, both in terms of the creation of stories by the Story-pig object and in the ontological transformations of Rose and Hans. It is *ceremonial time* and not the ‘tick-tick’ time but rather time’s circle, a bounded infinity that Riding is focussed on producing in her writing by avoiding an approach to time as being linear and progressive or fixed. Rather time could be more aptly seen as encompassing realms that Genette has described as “tick-tock time” in narrative. Notably in a “tick-tock” time the reader is held in a kind of suspension as opposed to the psychological realism reflected in a “tick-tick” time. In the latter, something new is always happening, a new character is being introduced, a new event is occurring. In Riding we could say that almost the opposite is the case, for themes and ideas, syntax and characters are constantly recurring, ‘going deeper’ perhaps or indeed going nowhere at all in particular, even as the reading perspectives change a little every time.

A characteristic of the ecstatic genre could be said to be the preoccupation with the examination of additive simultaneity. The use of ‘and’ satirically seems to mock and question and forward-motion – say, for example the idea of a plot. Instead, Riding seems to prefer to deny and deride the idea of time as accumulative and progressive. By this I mean that Riding seems to imply that we are yet far away from really living if we view time in this manner. By emphasising the word ‘and’, Riding brings attention to the idea that narrative representation can effectively ‘pull at the seams’ of a traditional plot-driven story. The author wants her reader to come away from her texts having conscientiously made an effort to keep up with her complexity in how she utilises an antimony against the idea of time as something that

could be described as ‘progressive’, or an ‘improvement’. Rather, it is through telling and reading stories that we can hope to progress to any kind of worthwhile illumination or ‘truth’. There is an important point to be made here, and that is the acknowledgement of Riding in exploring additive and anti-progressive dialectics side by side. The Hotel Moon is a hotel where time is measured by the moon. Also, Rose is in the story-time *khora* as well as in the painting-time *khora*. The effect of utilising additive simultaneity is a doubling of character as well as opening up ideas of time as not being merely chronological and progressive but containing a multitude of times and space. By treating plot in an ironic fashion, Riding subverts traditional views of the possibilities of narrative. Additive simultaneity operates through a kind of short-circuiting in expectations of representation.

Through repetition and through a certain kind of circularity, places and things are similar to what they were when the story began, and yet distinctly not the same. For example, when the Queen and Hans-as-king walk out into the moonlight, the destination of their journey is described as being “an elfin hillock” and yet, later “not an elfin hillock but a mud heap” (“TSP”, p 176). It is as though Riding is giving the reader an alternative reality, showing them the silver-and-golden realities, ironically represented in this particular example by a mud-heap. This combination of narrative techniques means that Riding achieves a new vision of time, a circular kind of time, returning back to where the narrative began, reminding the reader of themselves as reading subjects, seekers after ‘unreal’ realities that are closer to representing existence than merely existence itself. The story vanquishes itself, the ultimate in ‘designed waste’ being performed in narrative. For “things were never the same again” (“TSP”, p 183). Rose “was not the same”, and Hans, “was this Hans any more? so impolite and free with the guests” (“TSP”, p 184). In ecstatic writing, navigation of the genre’s matrices of oxymoronic descriptions and statements, the treatment of ontology and connectedness to time as being something other than psychological or realist representation

have provided, rests in part on the tendency of ecstatic writing to move away from memory or the past or the ‘yesterdays’ of the key events being narrated. Another example of how the text moves *away from memory*, and in doing so, avoids progressive time in narrative, where events are piled on top of one another in a consecutive fashion. This can be seen in Riding’s presentation of Hans changing Rose into the Queen every night. It is an apophatic action that he must take, he must engage in negative dialectics with himself. Through a wilful un-doing of himself, as it were, through an extremely subtle removal of himself, Hans can achieve his bliss, “walking beside the Queen was like a large loss of strength by which all was achieved that strength could not achieve.... By the death of this strength in long self-combat...he made himself Hans; and Hans made him a king” (“TSP”, p 182). Hans-as-king and Rose-as-Queen do not create memories together in the narration; walking beside Rose-as-Queen is considered achievement enough. It is a fragile balance that must be attained by Hans and yet the Queen is also a strong character unto herself, “a real queen would insist on not being imitated, and, further, on not being surrounded by ninnies.” (“TSP” p 172).

In this sense, we can note in “The Story-Pig” tale many times at which the story briefly ‘turns its back on itself’ in order to see or describe something totally *autre*, ‘other’, that is both diachronic in its achievement of being one narrative and then two narrative time-zones as well as anachronistic. There is a distinct sense of inevitability in the events occurring as they do, and it is this quality also that supports the ecstatic aesthetic which echoes the operation of fairy tales to suspend and subvert notions of ‘the possible’ in narrative. In addition it can be said that in “The Story-Pig”, the story briefly ‘turns its back on itself. It enacts a specific apophatic device, *apostrophein*, through access to the *khora*, ‘no-place place’. Riding does this in an extraordinary invention, by making her narrative diachronic when she describes a highly disjointed image, that of a Go-cart whizzing around an undefined *khora*, that appears to comment on and, importantly, comment ironically on some of the

characters or situations in the story itself, “Saying each one has its own value” (“TSP”, p 167).

Externality and the Fantastic-Ecstatic

Todorov’s seminal work *The Fantastic – a structural approach to a literary genre* (1973) helps elucidate how the fantastic or the “marvellous” has much in common with the definition of ecstatic literature. Todorov has defined the fantastic in literature as a genre in which ambiguity prevails. Is it “reality” or “dream”? “Truth” or “illusion?” The fantastic, for Todorov, occurs in “a world which is indeed our world.... there occurs an event which cannot be explained by the laws of this same familiar world.... The concept of the fantastic is therefore to be defined in relation to those of the real and the imaginary: and the latter deserve more than a mere mention.”⁴⁴ Todorov identified the necessary and common quality of all fantastic texts – hesitation: “*The reader’s hesitation* is therefore the first condition of the fantastic.”⁴⁵

In the fairy-tale “The Sandman” by Hans Christian Andersen, the original Sandman character places an umbrella over the sleeping children after throwing the “sleep-dust” over them. The “good” children would see the pictures on the inside of the umbrella and so have wondrous dreams, but the “bad” children would not receive the same treatment and so would not dream at all. This point relates to ecstatic time in that sleep is seen as a time of either inactivity (not dreaming or moving at its most negative experience) or some activity (dreaming). This idea of dreaming or not dreaming echoes a distinctive technique of Riding’s, which relates back to designed waste. Statements are oxymoronic and yet narrated

⁴⁴ Tzvetan Todorov. *The Fantastic – A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre*. Richard Howard (tr.). Cleveland and London: The Press of Case Western Reserve University, 1974, p 25.

⁴⁵ *ibid.*, p 31.

in a matter-of-fact way, leaving the reader in a curious uncertainty. Uncertainty is central to ecstatic writing, for it is the author's function in ecstatic literature to allow the volatility or mercurial aspects of narration to remain in a constant state of potential movement. Contrary statements are held together syntactically. Inanimate objects are described thus: "[t]hey were dead, but they were also alive – exactly because they were dead, having beheld the true rose that is not a flower at all, and because who beholds this 'shall never die'" ("TSP", p 175).

Todorov has separated fantastic literature into the helpful categories of the uncanny, the fantastic-uncanny, the fantastic-marvellous and the marvellous.⁴⁶ He writes: "[L]et us begin with the fantastic-uncanny. In this sub-genre events that seem supernatural throughout a story receive a rational explanation at its end.... Criticism has described, and often condemned, this type under the label of 'the supernatural explained'".⁴⁷ It can be surmised that "The Story-Pig" is not a fantastic-uncanny story but a fantastic-marvellous story, because it is in many ways ironic in the tone and syntax it uses. In the sentence "Rose might marry the chef, after all", the reader is not returned entirely back to the ordinary world as "things were not the same." What "things" Riding can be said to be talking about are self-consciously signalling the end of the story and confirmed by the activities and personalities of the central characters, Rose and Hans, being "ended". "Rose was not the same", and "Was this Hans anymore? So free with the hotel guests, especially the lady guests".

There are two possible outcomes to the reader's experience of impossible happenings: either the impossible is allowed validity because of the execution of the story's fantastical elements, or it is not. In an ecstatic reading, the work's most obvious moment of fantasticality is when the Story-pig object leaps out of the window and into the moon, which causes the improbable event of the moon then "promptly" setting. Whether or not this even 'happened'

⁴⁶ *ibid.*, p 44.

⁴⁷ *ibid.*

in reality is not the question here, rather the effect that such a fairy tale-like event brings attention to the act of story-telling itself, to its limits as being without limit. So, as Todorov says, “Literature is created from literature, not from reality, whether that reality is material or psychic.”⁴⁸

Like a kind of *micro-ecstasis*, hesitation subtly ties in with themes of self and disappearance. In Riding’s “The Story-Pig” the reader’s hesitation is built out of the narrator’s ability to combine elements of the real world with fairy-tale characterisations. So the snobby hotel guests and the two central characters, Rose and Hans, are joined by fairies, sprites and elves. Throughout, Riding gives a very clear description of the general essential characters of her setting, rather than their physical appearances. So, for instance, the guests at The Hotel Moon are described at first apophatically: “it cannot be denied...they were no more than amiable snobs” (“TSP”, p 170). The world is referred to as “perhaps not being as nice as it really was” (“TSP”, p 169) and the story-pig object “plays at” being men and women “for that was always something”. It can be observed that the fantastic-ecstatic has a kind of ontological believability, which compounds the reader’s hesitation about what is fiction and what is perhaps satiric commentary on certain example of “human ways and doings” (“TSP”, p 170). Hesitation in the ecstatic genre operates as a kind of barometer to the reading of the story, so that the reader does not simply consume the story as a plot-driven or psychological narrative, nor as a monologue. To paraphrase Todorov, the hesitation of the fantastic is shared between character and reader, “who must decide whether or not what they perceive derives from ‘reality’ as it exists in the common opinion.” If the story’s world is revealed to be internally consistent and explicable, then, says Todorov, “we say that the work belongs to another genre: the uncanny.” But if the story insists that “new laws of nature must

⁴⁸ *ibid.*, p 10.

be entertained to account for the phenomena, we enter the genre of the marvellous.”⁴⁹ The reader might fairly hesitate as they read and perhaps re-read Riding’s sentences, as she employs oxymoronic devices and utilises other techniques that illustrate the operations of negativity understanding the activity in context of awareness of such techniques as *apostrophein*, *khora*, and *aposiopesis*. The observations about the hotel guests might not be just words as they seem to ring rather too close to home as it were, and the reader is put into the position of having to feel a little self-conscious about their own character, hoping not to be like the hotel guests, but as the kind of person, like Rose or Hans who is able to apprehend the truth, or what is referred to as “the golden and silver halves” of reality.

Riding provides two detailed prefaces to her collection. She makes the important point that as a writer she pursues the *vrai absolue* and tries to distil in her writing the “essential truth” of words and their meaning, through varying techniques, through their unmeaning, through “ending in contradictions”. Riding presents in “The Story-Pig” a narrative that is an absolute inversion of the expectations of narrative representation in which the writing is meant to mirror reality. It is a kind of fairy-tale-for-adults with its musings on reality, perception and even dreams. In terms of literary context, Lewis Carroll had transformed the fairy-tale into auto-erotic *bildungsroman* (as well as pedagogy and poetry), and Italo Calvino and André Breton played with invisibles and the idea of the “dream-reals”. Riding also manipulates fairy-tale narrative structure. Todorov’s distinction between the fantastic and the uncanny and his insight into the genres of the fantastic-uncanny and the fantastic-marvellous are helpful here.⁵⁰ Irony is not part of the “pure” fantastic which, as Todorov has demonstrated, is characterised by “hesitation” on the part of the reader as to whether, even though improbably, the events she or he has been reading about can be said ‘to

⁴⁹ *ibid.*, p 41.

⁵⁰ *ibid.*, p 44.

be' or to be 'true'. Riding's writing contains at times a distinctly ironic tone, which distinguishes her writing from the fantastic in its most pure sense, but there are certainly fairy-tale elements present in her stories.

Eric Auerbach has written extensively on the concepts of mimesis and 'reality' in narrative. In the first chapter of his book *Mimesis* (1946), Auerbach compares Homer's *Odyssey* with the Old Testament – specifically the episode in which God asks Abraham to sacrifice his son Isaac, in order to test Abraham's faith. In Auerbach's words, in the Old Testament example, "[e]verything remains unexpressed" in a portentous "background". Auerbach contrasts this background state with Homer's composition in which everything is "externalised, uniformly illuminated phenomena, at a definite time and in a definite place, connected in a perpetual foreground." In the Biblical story, "time and place are undefined...the whole, permeated with the most unrelieved suspense and directed toward a single goal (and to that extent far more of a unity) remains mysterious and 'fraught with background'".⁵¹

"The Story-Pig" is, like Auerbach's Biblical example, "fraught with background". It would decrease its evocative effect and its feeling and impression of 'ancient-ness' to build up a legible foreground, either by piling up events that definitely occur in the story – and hence, *create memories* – or by externalising the characters or the inanimate thinking/talking objects any more than Riding has already chosen to do. It would seem therefore that in ecstatic writing, 'less is more' proves to be the standard ecstatic authors aim to achieve. In ecstatic writing there is a notable move *away from memory*. As Auerbach notes, in the Old Testament the Biblical stories do not have as their goal or function the desire to "bewitch the

⁵¹ Eric Auerbach, 'Odysseus' scar', from *Mimesis: the Representation of Reality in Western Literature*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1946, pp 11-12.

senses”.⁵² As he points out, the Biblical text, “[f]ar from seeking, like Homer, merely to make us forget our own reality for a few hours...seeks to overcome our reality: we are to fit our own life in its world.”⁵³ Importantly, “The Story-Pig” also executes with flair that quality of Biblical texts in relation to the sublime, without actually being religious (in fact, often putting religious terms ironically to the reader), that is, the quality of the modern ecstatic text whereby “the two realms of the sublime and the everyday are not only actually unseparated but basically inseparable”.⁵⁴

To return to one of the major themes we have been discussing, Krell confirms potentiality (in the example of “The Story-Pig” as a tale of, amongst other things, “potentiality for volition”) as being central to the ecstatic genre, noting, “one could almost say that ecstatic temporality is pregnant with history, which is waiting to be born.”⁵⁵ Many examples from Riding’s work show her use of the literary device of *aposiopesis*, the coming to a sudden halt, as if reluctant to say what ‘is unsayable’. In many ways her stories are, as Samuels has noted of Riding’s poetry, “extremely and uncomfortably *awake*, full of difficult nouns and syntax and rarely given to lyric trance. They are meant to prick the reader to self-consciousness rather than to function as dream events (for writer *or* reader)”.⁵⁶ So too, no seasons take place, and the reader is given scant description of the interior or exterior of the Hotel Moon or the characters’ external appearances. The reader is left to imagine what Hans and Rose actually look like, as if their faces are indefinitely blurred, characteristic techniques of depiction in the ecstatic genre.

The painting above the fireplace is an example of how Riding uses *aposiopesis*, itself a part of apophatic representations in writing through describing it, not positively, but as “a

⁵² *ibid.*, p 14.

⁵³ *ibid.*, p 15.

⁵⁴ *ibid.*, p 23.

⁵⁵ David Farrell Krell, *op. cit.*, p 9.

⁵⁶ Samuels, ‘Creating Criticism’, *op. cit.*, p lii-liiii.

completed picture...with everything left out that might upset their immediate happiness.”

Here it can be seen that the author is utilising an apophatic device, *aposiopesis*, denied reality, elsewhere what has been referred to as structured absences and refused information. *Aposiopesis* is a specific type of “backgrounding”. We can think of it as a pointed intensification of Auerbach’s biblical potentiality in representation. As a literary technique, *aposiopesis* is an exit from guided representation to the indicated unsayable. Through her use of such apophatic devices as *aposiopesis* and *apostrophein* as well as preferencing nocturnal ceremonial time and creating an ‘ever-lasting present tense’, Riding performs varied ecstatic characteristics of writing.

The Painting at The Hotel Moon

The mysteriously “beautiful” painting is hung above a fireplace that is never lit, “no spluttering, aggressive fire” (“TSP”, p 167) takes precedence over the Story-pig object’s paramount position of importance. Elsewhere, the narrator refers to “that madman, the sun” and the candles are even drawn to express their irritability at having been kept burning, “(how foolish and ill-tempered they felt, made to burn for absolutely nothing, not even for an illness or a death)” (“TSP”, p 169). Darkness and shadows seem to be preferred over garish illumination. The painting is important on several levels: it is not only a form of representation, of mimesis, being essentially one of the possible characteristics of a drawn picture, which happens to also contain the invisible Rose-as-queen “a very invisible queen in a very visible ship she floated...she became her true self”; it is also an example of a depiction of what will be discussed and described as ‘*khora*’ – the no-where, no-place ‘place’, which will be described in detail. For the reader has little idea beyond what the painting might look like, only that it may be a landscape painting of the sea and contain a ship as well as a detail

of “the Valley of a Thousand Turns”. In “The Garden of Hieronymus Bosch”, Michel de Certeau states, “[t]he fact of there being nothing to read in the painting means that there is nothing to look for behind it, that it is all there, marked, including the keeping-at-a-distance of reading.”⁵⁷ In Riding’s story, she presents an object in the painting that is the direct opposite of de Certeau’s observation about the Bosch work. For it is the painting in “The Story-Pig” that is capable of transformation and of mirroring, as well as being responsible for, like a god, ‘protecting’ its flock, “They were inside the picture; they were behind the picture, on the reverse side” (“TSP”, p 175). It is the painting that can depict the silver and gold realities and so alter perception completely.

It has been mentioned that one of the most obvious examples of the division between the visible and the invisible can be found in examining the enigmatic painting that features prominently in the story. The difficulty for the reader is that, as to be expected, given the story’s constitutive inquiry into the nature of representation, the painting above the fireplace is not described outright. What happens in narrative when such apophatic techniques are utilised? For instead of providing *cataphatic*, positive descriptions, Riding allows other images to swirl in the mind of her reader such as the sea and moonlight, fairy-tale images such as sprites, an elfin hillock, a rose-elf, “a deep quiet in the ears” “something was singing, but not a nightingale” ‘the little matchgirl’ and so on. She also uses necromantic terms such as ‘enchantment’ ‘magic’ ‘conjured’ and refers to imaginary figures from children’s tales such as Hans Christian Andersens’ ‘Sandman’, which she juxtaposes next to the Sandman’s twin brother, Death. It is not until the end of the story that the reader is provided with more concrete details as to the picture’s image – and Riding further obscures her depiction by stating that the picture had been found “turned to the wall” and “when it was turned back it

⁵⁷ Michel de Certeau, *The Mystic Fable, Volume One: The sixteenth and seventeenth centuries*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1992, p 53.

was unmistakably faded, as if someone had scrubbed it hard...to wash away the surface and get through to a better picture underneath". The implications of Riding's reference to the scrubbing of the picture is that she provides fruitful ground for comment on depiction and mimesis-expectation. What is it to represent or to depict? What kinds of zones do we enter when we enter depiction? Is depiction itself somehow 'unclean' and what could that mean for narrative? We have already noted that Riding uses the devices that establish structured absences through refused information and *aposiopesis*. Is meaning 'beneath' in ecstatic representation? That is, does the reader have to go beneath the surface of the text instead of falling into a "lyric trance"⁵⁸?

As well as being a nocturnal imagery of mystery and obscurity, in addition, the painting enigmatically creates an image of movement and passage by the mention of a meandering valley or perhaps more specifically, a kind of imaginative archipelago by which one must navigate by "a thousand turns". The painting is therefore not a static image of simple mimesis, but seems to present to the mind of the reader and kind of (ideal?) painting that, like the ontology of the characters such as Rose and Hans who become "the king" and "the Queen" at night, is full of potentiality and multifariousness. It is a quality of the painting that the painting is somehow complete as a world in itself, but also – to those, who like Hans, can catapult themselves into a subtle reality of the *apophatic*, or the negative side of reality. In Riding's stories she provides access to other worlds and alternative realities, complete with utterly different perspectives of time, "[a]nd then there was the silver half, to-morrow....And then there was the golden half, for ever and after, and the Golden Queen who was really both gold and silver, always full of surprises but always the same person" ("TSP", p 173).

⁵⁸ Samuels in 'Creating Criticism' states, "Riding more often declared that poetry must not succumb to the verbal immediacies that captivated Stein. It must push toward complex intellectual matrices of truth. Accordingly, Riding's poems are extremely and uncomfortably *awake*, full of difficult nouns and syntax and rarely given to lyric trance." (*op. cit.*, p lii-liii)

Previously the narrator has referred to reality as mirroring the aspects of the picture that we are discussing, “that was only half the reality, and the silver half at that. It left out the golden half, that had to do with the real visions and with real nobility” (“TSP”, p 172).

Finally, we can consider the painting as animated by itself being a supposed mimesis of the nocturnal reality – when Rose achieves Queen-status and when Hans, through reducing himself absolutely, becomes king and therefore equal to walk along beside her – so when it is turned to the wall, it is as though it is performing an act of *apostrephein*, a turning away, and through this turning away, it is personifying a sense of almost-disgust and dismay of the the painting-as-object itself refusing to be seen by whomever should walk into the living room of the Hotel Moon. The idea of ‘scrubbing hard’ to ‘get to the real’ is reflective of how Riding’s prose operates. She is principally concerned with getting to ‘the truth’ and sets out to achieve this through many circuitous routes, ecstatic because they are not typically ‘progressive’ or ‘cumulative’ in the sense, “this followed that, and so on” in narrative representation.

Absences and *Apostrephein*

The section that follows develops in more detail how Riding narrates ‘from the inside’ and is particularly concerned with hollows, with the reverse-side and with containment. It also examines the interaction of the text within “economies of containment or reserve”. The Story-pig object keeps the stories to itself, and does not give anything to anyone except Hans. Within the absence of the Story-pig’s belly, stories are continuously made out of debris, the basket of “forgotten things’ show that at time, absence of ownership may benefit others. Rose, as Queen, wears the “pretty red slippers” (“TSP”, p 176) that belong to a hotel guest. The anthropomorphised objects that behave like slavish versions of the hotel guests represent ecstatic mirroring that Riding creates around objects and characters. The invisible is the only

‘real’ reality and in an apophatic manner, much is made of negative descriptions and absences, whether ontological or otherwise. Timothy Walsh in his study of how gaps and absences signify potentiality for ‘increase’ in literature:

[s]tructured absences are also a primary means of conveying a sense of the purposely incomplete or pregnantly ‘unfinished’ state of a work that can potentially amplify readerly dynamics a hundredfold. Often...either direct or tacit appeals to inexpressibility accompany the use of structured absences so that the art of leaving things out is subtly tied to an awareness of what cannot be said.⁵⁹

The following example illustrates the propensity toward representing the invisible by exploring things hidden from sight from the beginning of “The Story-Pig”, namely through narrating about the belly of the story-pig object, “[t]he pig’s belly was not shiny inside, but no one saw or thought of the inside” (“TSP”, p 167). Riding clearly demonstrates her interest in interiority and draws the reader’s attention to ideas of containment and hollows. The ‘Story-pig’s belly’ is negatively or apophatically described as “*not* a grown-up bank, with marble floors and gold lettering” [*my italics*] (“TSP”, p 168). It comes across as an other-worldly object for two reasons: firstly, because no sound is acknowledged as occurring when the hotel guests “always [put] too much in” (*ibid*) place money in the ‘money slit...or story-slit’, giving the impression of limitless depth to the belly, which is further enhanced by the statement further on in the story that the ‘keeper’ of the Story-pig, Hans, has the key to unlock the object and so be kept in pocket money “so at the end of the day he never fretted over wants not worth fretting over” (“TSP”, p 177); and secondly, because of the fantastical function of the pig’s belly, namely its ability to transform the spoken words of the guests into stories, “[f]or the pig would go on all night telling over to itself all the stories that it had

⁵⁹ Timothy Walsh. *The Dark Matter of Words: Absence, Unknowing, and Emptiness in Literature*. Chicago: Southern Illinois University Press, 1998, p 112.

heard, fancying that it stepped gracefully this way or that...when of course it sprawled as helplessly as ever on its stupid trotters” (“TSP”, p 169). In this way, the reader is placed in a kind of doublesight in terms of the potentiality of reading when the function of the Story-pig object’s belly is analysed. The contents of the belly are apparently the “idle thoughts” of the hotel guests. The Story-pig’s belly could be said to be performing a narrative function and even to be narrating the story that is “The Story-Pig”. “The inside” is rarely a perspective that a story is narrated from, and so Riding can be observed as being an author that is exploring new dimensions of narrative representation. It can be readily deduced even from the second paragraph of the tale that the reader will have to be willing to actively engage with the text by accepting certain blanks, refused information, however amiably presented, or in Walsh’s terms, “structured absence”. As Riding says, “they would sit around the Story-pig and tell one another things to increase their self-respect – not exactly lies, but not exactly the truth.” (“TSP”, p 168).

The Story-pig object literally creates out of debris, out of the “spoken thoughts of the idle hotel guests” and so makes entirely new stories in which it would “dance this way and that”. In reality, sadly “it would do no such thing but stay as ever, perched on its stupid trotters on its place above the fireplace”. In analysing Wittgenstein’s stance on eventually adopting an “official quietism”⁶⁰, the Story-pig object becomes paradoxically a powerful symbol of an almost stubborn silence, together with a simultaneous loquacity, because of the fact that it has “gorged itself” on the “idle words” of the hotel guests. Perhaps it could be accredited to the ideation toward silence by Wittgenstein that we should also be prepared to accept “the idea of the gap”⁶¹. The gap will be further described in terms of operations of negativity, that of embracing the fissure, the break, the *apostrophein*, ‘turning away’ in

⁶⁰ Alfred Nordmann. ‘Wittgensteinian “Quietism”’, part of the Symposium: Apology for Quietism, Part Three. *Common Knowledge*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2009, p 371.

⁶¹ *ibid.*, p 368.

textual representation. There is an apophatic movement to this action that a story can perform.

Part of this discussion has examined the ways in which *apostrephein* or ‘apostrophe’ acts as an operative agent of the performance of ‘designed waste’ in negative dialectics. The penultimate example of *apostrephein* in “The Story-Pig” has already been mentioned, that of the moment when the Story-pig object skips out of the window and into the moon – an action which causes the reaction of the moon immediately setting. This is an impossible event occurring, and yet its fantastical and anti-climactic effect definitely demarcate it as belonging to ecstatic literature. The economy of movement achieved in the feat of the Story-Pig object being able to achieve this extraordinary and fantastical bound is an example of ‘excess of movement’ in economies of expenditure and reserve. Excessive, and yet also curiously implying satisfaction of the narrative, for the moon performs an equally impossible feat and “sets”. So the moon is performing an ecstatic action of utterly and totally disappearing into a hole that is invisible to ordinary perception and depictions of ‘reality’ by setting – an action usually reserved for the sun, not the moon.

Another example of *apostrephein* occurs when the king/Hans changes to being merely Hans (*Hans-reductio*) and he is placed in the same room as the character who is another reality had been the Queen/Rose but is now a hotel guest, a woman in her fur coat fast asleep “[a]nd she would not wake up. She must have got herself very tired on her long, long walk” (“TSP”, p 183). This episode can be described as *apostrephein* because a new space is created, that of the reader and the characters ‘suddenly finding themselves’ in a part in the narrative that is unexpected. Hans is supposed to have left the living room in order to go to his own room and to sleep and therefore the event is an unqualified happening. In the next sentence the reader is told, “[h]er having looked so hard at Hans as she went out of the door made him afraid to touch her” (“TSP”, p 183). This sentence is very problematic, for, like the

Story-pig's leap and the appearance of the strange Go-cart, it is impossible to know how and when it could occur. How can the sleeping woman "look so hard at Hans" when she is said to be "deeply" asleep? Hans himself is *apostropheom*-ed in the episode, for he is described as looking at the woman at the same time that he is described as being away in another place, asleep. Riding is showing the possibility of different time zones existing and this doubling can be said to be akin to apostrophe, that is, *apostrophein*, 'to turn away'.

The Event of Designed Waste

As well as Riding's "the individual un-real" perspective, another important theoretical point that is relevant to this topic of time is her term "designed waste", introduced above in the first section of this chapter. Designed waste resolves the problem of the integrity of the conception of apophatic fiction. It manages to operate by being not only a narrative on its own but also is intertwined with a number of meta-narratives that combines to 'use themselves up'. Designed waste is literary ecology.

As Iser's theory of reading posits, the reader may navigate the text that prefers internalisation, contradiction and antimony over mimesis and tends toward differing forms of negative or apophatic modes in which to express itself: "a frame of reference embracing both ends of a reality scale, this is not because it lacks the attributes of reality, but because it tell us something about reality, and the conveyor cannot be identical to what is conveyed."⁶²

Riding animates the inanimate by using personification in her portrayal of the inanimate objects, "how they prattled on!". These objects reflect the anonymous hotel guests who, like the objects, are continuously evading some kind of unspeakable 'truth' about

⁶² Wolfgang Iser. *The Act of Reading – A Theory of Aesthetic Response*. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978, p 54.

themselves. What is meant by this is that if the hotel guests can “look back and forgive themselves their vanities as if it had happened long long ago” and the inanimate objects though they prattle on “could not help making sense” then it could be said that the inanimate objects achieve a ‘higher’ state ontologically, unlike the hotel guests who “tell one another things...[that] were not exactly true....” (“TSP”, p 169). Also, toward the end of the story, the queen is said to have responded to one of only three cases of reported speech, “Is there anything I can do for you?” by “smiling no”. *Smiling no* is a mixed metaphor of apophatic communication and silence which yet communicates a message to the speaker, Hans. The king’s act of saying “Boo!” right into the Story-pig object’s “snout” could be interpreted as an excessive noise that is like a sharp exhalation, it causes the ecstatic moment that follows, which is the leap of the Story-pig object into the moon. Furthermore, Rose is a character who does not add voice to the silence of any situation, “Rose...would not have dared to form an opinion.” Similarly, “the queen was too kind to criticise anyone outright...she would have just turned the other way.” A silent character chooses not to ‘lower’ themselves to spoken speech; the more silent a character is, the more wise. In “The Story-Pig” it is Rose-as-Queen who in direct contrast to the hotel guests, is too intelligent and dignified to bother with speaking, she communicates in other effective ways. Hans, “his eyes were in the right place” attains his complete self when he focusses on his metamorphosis into Hans-as-king through constant ‘un-doing’ of his self-perception rather than “prattling on” like the ignorant hotel guests. The other largely silent character is the anthropomorphised Story-pig object which leaves the Hotel Moon and the story itself. Riding is multiplying notions of what is now called post-humanist thought with her animated objects echoing the personalities of the ignorant hotel guests.

These objects are ruled by one certain law: they acquire ‘life’ when their owner is ‘the queen’. In “The Story-Pig” it is only when Rose is asleep that “the things in the discarded

pieces of luggage were all hers. And the Sandman taught her how to speak smoothly and do her hair the right way.... At night she stepped into the beautiful picture... a very invisible queen in a very visible ship, on her way toward the place where she would be visible only to those who knew how to see her as a queen and speak to her as a queen.” (“TSP”, p 171).

In order for Rose to be elevated in status like the hotel guests who she blindly and automatically respects, she (unconsciously) acquires their cast-offs – such as the “pretty red slippers” – and in building her “trousseau” she prepares for her new life as she imagines and hopes one day to become (Hans’) wife. She therefore could be said to be an agent of designed waste; like the Story-pig object who transforms the “idle” words of the hotel guests into stories, and so amuses itself, Rose preserves and recycles the ‘cast-offs’ of the hotel guests in order to acquire a trousseau for her future life for “the Mrs. Whoever that she is going to be” (“TSP”, p 171).

It may be inferred that Riding rejects external descriptions in favour of both cerebral gymnastics in dealing with oxymoronic and apophatic descriptions, “walking beside the Queen was like a large loss of strength by which all was achieved that strength could not achieve” (“TSP”, p 182); as well as by embracing the evocative shadows attendant to nocturnal time. Similarly, when the hotel guests reach the point of laughing at each other’s stories, their laughter bursts forth only when a “story did not seem to have a definite point” (*ibid*). Many examples abound throughout the story of this curious technique which performs a kind of anti-climactic function in the narrative, an example of the writer performing ‘designed waste’.

It is a delicate balancing act that Riding performs, and it is a technique derived from a thorough display of achieving ‘designed waste’ – for the ecstatic moment that occurs at the end of “The Story-Pig” is also partly anti-climactic because the story is reduced to the point

where the Story-pig object has disappeared, there is no moon in the night sky and even the narrator ends the tale with the words, “don’t you see my dears, that the scene has shifted?”. Through the utilisation of the literary devices of *aposiopesis*, *apostrophein* and ‘designed waste’, Laura Riding’s short prose provides ample scope for ecstatic narrative.

Part III Réda Bensmaïa's *The Year of Passages* and Apophatic Ecstasy

“Alas, whither shall I climb now with my longing? I look out from every mountain for fatherlands and motherlands. But nowhere have I found a home; I am unsettled in every city... I depart from every gate.”

Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*.

Introduction to *The Year of Passages*

Several characteristics of ecstatic and apophatic representation in narrative have been defined in reference to the works of Laura Riding. The focus of this study now shifts to the work of another Trans-Atlantic twentieth-century writer, Réda Bensmaïa, whose work *The Year of Passages* reflects *apophasis* and *anamorphosis* through both technique and subject matter that can be called ecstatic. Réda Bensmaïa presents a narrative that elaborates a kind of hysterical laughter captured in his opening to *The Year of Passages*. This delirium, the laughter of despair, is expressed not only through his syntax, which most often operates as a series of hysterical accumulations of phrases and sentences, but also by the consistent use of the exclamation mark.

This may be described as Bensmaïa’s interpretation of designed waste, for the excessive exclamation marks simultaneously draw the reader further into and yet also away from the text – they intrigue the reader and yet they also provide an impression of ‘the last word’. It is a kind of turning away, *apostrophein*, that echoes the exhalation of breath, the escape into laughter, the escape from tension, the brief escape of talking or even breathing.

Bensmaïa was born in Kouba, Algeria in 1944, arrived in the United States in 1979, and is currently Professor Emeritus of Comparative Literature at Brown University.

Bensmaïa has published widely on French and Algerian literature of the twentieth century

and actively promoted writers such as Hedagayet and Kateb Yacine as well as Céline⁶³. He is particularly concerned with the writings of Gilles Deleuze as well as, more generally, film criticism and contemporary philosophy. Some of the ideas of Deleuze will be explored here in terms of their narrative enactment in Bensmaïa's text. His Algerian heritage is central to his work, and the possibility of creating a nationality through language and the production of creative works seems to be a goal that he wishes to attain as he battles with the desire to write with apophatic or 'negative' notions of a desire for silence, for 'the final word'. Apophatic discourse can be understood to include works like *The Year of Passages*, and this chapter will look at the implications of its apophatic or 'negative' dialectics.⁶⁴

If I am asserting that Bensmaïa's work can be described as ecstatic, it should come as no great surprise that the figure of God is missing from the narrative. For Riding, 'God' becomes Miss Banquett. For Bensmaïa 'God' is agnostic absence. In some ways, the function of God is taken over by the figure of Macha in Bensmaïa's work. It is important to note here, however, that the author does not merely replace God with a fictional 'character', as will be shown. *The Year of Passages* is a semi-autobiographical picaresque work in which the lines between author and narrator are consistently blurred. The story follows the eponymously multinamed narrator as he suffers various repercussive effects of having his book *Dead Letters* published. For reasons that are not explicitly described, he is in danger with "the authorities" and must be exiled to suburban Minneapolis in Part Two. However, he asserts, "There is nothing *satanic* about my *Dead Letters!* There wasn't an iota of satanism

⁶³ His defensive position on Céline (Louis-Ferdinand Destouches) could be considered by many to be subversive in itself, as the French writer's anti-Semitic views made him a pariah in French cultural circles during the time of the Second World War, when pamphlets expressing these views were being circulated by Céline himself, supposedly backed financially by the German Nazi Party. Notwithstanding his achievements in ecstatic literature, for most it has since proved impossible to separate the writing from the man.

⁶⁴ The term 'negative dialectics' was first coined by Theodor W. Adorno. See *The Origin of Negative Dialectics – Theodor W. Adorno, Walter Benjamin, and the Frankfurt Institute*. Susan Buck-Morss (ed.). New York: The Free Press, 1977. Adorno is quoted as saying "the total organization of society through big business and its omnipresent technology has...taken unbroken possession of the world and imagination" (*op. cit.*, p. 185).

in the letters in general! Satan is the body and soul and spirit and sex of people who don't know how to read! ...Satan is reborn of his ashes every time a nation wants the body of a writer *dead or alive!*" (p. 99). The reader gets the distinct sense that the author-narrator could have touched on many 'taboo' topics, such as holding an anarchistic, anti-French view of cultural life in Algeria.⁶⁵ There are two other major 'characters' in the story, Macha his companion, and Aely, his 'subconscious'.

In Part One of *The Year of Passages*, the author makes clear that in the reality he is narrating, with all of its difficulties and pitfalls, it is Macha who consistently calms him, "[a]nd, as usual, Macha was the one who got us out of the mess" (p. 23). Macha, as the source of reassurance for the author's many – although ironic – anxieties, takes on the role of the typical comforter or ideal Father-Mother characterisation. Perhaps Bensmaïa, like Riding, wishes to provoke debate in the naive believer in God who is suffering from existential concerns. Whatever the case, the writer presents Macha as the eternal pacifier. This point will come up again later in this analysis, as we look deeper at the figure of Macha and her anamorphic presentation. The apophatic techniques that will come in to focus include Macha the Wife Machine; Aely; Subtraction and Reduction, and Passages and Space. Bensmaïa's *The Year of Passages* is a complex and challenging work to read. Bensmaïa presents a story that is dominated by a tendency toward seeing outlines, patterns, excess and reduction together with a kind of ironical and semi-humorous delirium which recalls Céline's new style of writing that modernized French literature. In *Journey to the End of the Night* (1932), he used a working-class, spoken style of language and attacked what he considered to be the overly polished, "bourgeois" language of the "academy". Bensmaïa's narrative tone

⁶⁵ Bensmaïa's narrator constantly critiques the French 'Academy of Letters' for its biases and notes how Algerian artists are underwhelmingly represented at the National Art Gallery of Algeria, -- "not a single Baya" (p. 72). See also: "As a matter of fact, this nation has stooped to the lowest level, the Master said, and soon it will have renounced both its *raison d'etre* and its spirit. Bensmaïa, *The Year of Passages* (p. 55).

of ironic delirium is set side-by-side with ‘Scholium # 5’ or “Sync #2’, snatches of poetry, the utilisation of several languages, even Office Word functions such as CTRL+X and CTRL+V. Written in the last decade of the twentieth century, the book is situated in post-modernism; it comes as no surprise that the book itself refers to its own conception and existence as a collection of words on paper that has been censored to the point of its author’s exile incited by the very act of publishing these writings – also known as *Dead Letters*. This idea is further confirmed through double entendres such as the constant referencing throughout of “Poor Monsieur Rmad” “Mourad Bensmaier” “poor R.B.” which infers the idea of identity doublings which are constant in this work. Is *The Year of Passages* also, somehow, the fictional work *Dead Letters*, written by the same author? What does this say about the aphasia that seems to affect the author, who, far from taking an omniscient third-person narrative standpoint, instead presents a first-person narrator who intrigues, pleads with and accuses the reader – perhaps of ignorance.

This author-narrator guides himself and the reader through events and principles of loss and reduction as well as proliferation of semantic meaning. In *The Year of Passages*, the reader follows the narrator through an eternal kind of dark, where ‘*everything and nothing*’ is discussed and although several catastrophic events occur (such as the exile of the author to Minneapolis) we follow this *Everyman/Literary-Man* as he ventures through places such as cemeteries, veritably relying on the resting places of the dead as his backdrop to the action described. These peregrinations are communicated almost ‘in blood’ in that there is an urgency about the text, evidenced by the continual use of the exclamation mark as well as the draft but yet not unfinished feel of the text, with its snatches of poetry, Farsi script, and indeterminate structure, for example, splitting the text into ‘Scholiums’ without defining what a scholium might be in regards to the context of its structure as a literary narrative.

The reader is also placed in a position that explores the literary performance of a kind of hyper-awareness, a delirium of word-making, “every sentence in the world is united against me to make poetry. I can see myself running around like a madman, but at the same time I also see a horde of delirious poetic sentences that *pass right before my eyes. No rectification...!*” (p. 28). Bensmaïa explores the idea that language can terrorize, especially the sensitive, unprotected individual.

Although the narrator does not mention the exact charges brought against him by “the authorities”, the reader is given the distinct impression that it is through making controversial statements against how the State runs the cultural life of Algeria, displaying its obvious preference for “authorized” French authors and artists above the promotion of Algerian writers and artists, that the author-narrator is facing down exile. Bensmaïa brings into focus the need for Algeria to wrest itself away from the grip of Francophone traditions and develop its own literary ‘present-tense’ that has relevance for all Algerians. In many subtle ways, Bensmaïa is a didactic writer who believes in the vehicle of fiction and of narrative representation to explore themes of not-belonging, of being exiled, of having to emigrate – as he himself settled in the United States, escaping the tumult of the after-effects devastating society after the Algerian War.⁶⁶

He also offers much scope for a post-colonial reading of ecstatic writing, as he is greatly concerned with problems associated with being “lost in translation”. So when he writes, “[a]ll exile presupposes a centre, a point of origin from which one stands out or moves away...all genuine becoming presupposes an exile of some kind, the experience of something outside of one’s origin to which one could *return*”⁶⁷ we can surmise that he will

⁶⁶ The Algerian War, also known as the Algerian War for Independence or the Algerian Revolution, fought from 1954 to 1962 between France and the Algerian National Liberation Front, led to Algeria declaring independence from France.

⁶⁷ Réda Bensmaïa. *Experimental Nations or The Invention of the Maghreb*. p. 44.

be interested in depicting spaces and belonging, exile and exodus. He goes on to state that “Minoritarian is a becoming and should not be confused with the word ‘minority’, [for] in a becoming, one is deterritorialized”.⁶⁸ Bensmaïa here borrows the term ‘minoritarian’ from Deleuze and Guattari.

It is almost as though Bensmaïa is asking his reader to consider why they themselves turn to fiction in the first place, for reasons other than research in literature (in French) or otherwise. In his non-fiction work, *Experimental Nations or The Invention of the Maghreb* he writes, “[t]he idea of an Algerian literature written in French was a contradiction in the context of decolonization and it was believed that political independence would soon be followed by cultural and linguistic independence”.⁶⁹ In a country such as Algeria where at least seventy per cent of the population is illiterate, what language does a writer utilise in terms of effective influence and indebtedness to that person’s particular culture or national citizenship? For Bensmaïa is an author who writes within the knowledge and acknowledgment of the idea that texts intersect and echo one another without losing their singularity, saying, “[m]y nations are experimental in that they are above all nations that writers have had to imagine or explore as if they were territories to rediscover and stake out, step by step, countries to invent and to draw while creating one’s language.”⁷⁰ Furthermore, Bensmaïa asks, “Does the writer *belong* to a nation? What does this *belonging* mean for Francophone writers?”⁷¹ His character goes to the national gallery for some intellectual and artistic stimulation, “a last smell of the air of this city of senseless carnage, a last image of this city of wild desire, *no rectification...*” (*The Year of Passages*, p. 71), but he is ultimately disappointed by what he sees as being the underrepresentation of many fine Algerian artists

⁶⁸ *ibid.* p. 45.

⁶⁹ Réda Bensmaïa. *Experimental Nations or The Invention of the Maghreb*, *op. cit.*, p. 13.

⁷⁰ *ibid.*, pp. 18-

⁷¹ *ibid.* p 19.

during his time in the gallery. The passages that the author-narrator tries to take in order to rejuvenate or even simply to belong somewhere turn out to be dead ends, as they do not offer a productive creative space to adequately house the works of the country's greatest artists. Over and over again wherever the narrator turns, he is thwarted from a sense of place, of love, of family ties, of patriotism, of being an Arab man.

The post-colonial reading of ecstatic writing in the twentieth century can be said to examine such themes as exodus and exile, “[b]ecause man is the majoritarian par excellence, whereas becoming is minoritarian, all becoming is a *minoritarian* becoming”.⁷² How can ecstatic writing evolve and connect with the currently displaced?⁷³ It soon becomes clear that Bensmaïa, reproducing the Deleuzian rhizome, takes a position of ‘the middle ground’ by choosing to stay in ‘becoming’:

This identity is no longer singular because it is itself in the process of becoming. And this becoming (*devenir*) implies an experience of an outside of (the) self, of a self or an origin toward which would could return (*revenir*). It is thus presented as a paradoxical experience of a going outside of oneself that does not presuppose an inside...limited by any one given self or identity (psychological, national, or even linguistic).⁷³

It is within this process of ‘becoming’ that a new national identity can be created for the Algerian.

⁷² *ibid.*

⁷³ Ecstatic writing concerns itself with themes of exits and escapes. After the atrocity of the massacre in Christchurch on March 15th, 2019, Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern spoke for New Zealand when she stated, “This is not who we are.” <https://www.washingtonexaminer.com/news/this-is-not-who-we-are-new-zealand-pm-denounces-mosque-shooting>. Accessed 18th March, 2019. Prime Minister Ardern reacted swiftly to the unprecedented terrorist attack and immediately passed significant changes to firearm possession laws in New Zealand.

⁷³ Réda Bensmaïa. *Experimental Nations or The Invention of the Maghreb*, p. 42.

At work here in this narrative is the plethora of *khora*, no-place while simultaneously being *all these places at once*. Far from being at ease in the space, which may also be said to be an apophatic stance, there is a strong sense that the author-narrator is trapped, both figuratively (in Minneapolis) and literally (within the text), “I’ve got to bury Sadeg Hedayet and get assholified, bury him as I get assholified in Minneapolis” (p. 87) and “even if I play, I’m still out of bounds, so I play all the same, but I’m out of bounds all the same, I play all the same, I’m in bounds, I’m in the shit, because there’s no out of bounds, *no exit!*” (p. 116).

Bensmaïa’s author-narrator also speaks ironically of “first-class space, young space, expressive space, French space, the space of dreams, minority space, gay-lesbo space, protected space, money space, Muslim space, space à la mode de Caen, Maghrebian space, Beur space, Khorote space, pleasure-dome space!” (p. 87). In this way, apophatic excess is represented in fiction.

Ecstatic Temporality: the ‘Always Already’

Discussions on temporality are developed from the central idea of the ‘always already’ present in Derrida’s analyses of the writings of Martin Heidegger. This kind of temporality is a recurrent feature in ecstatic narrative. An associate and contemporary of Derrida, Krell discusses further this theme of the ‘always already’.⁷⁴ This section draws on Krell’s research to show how Bensmaïa performs a realisation of the ‘always already’ in *The Year of Passages*. Before looking at the text, I’ll delineate what is meant by the ‘always already’ and point to some ways it functions in apophatic and anamorphic literature.

⁷⁴ Particularly his article, “History, Natality, Ecstasy – Derrida’s First Seminar on Heidegger 1964-1965”. *Research in Phenomenology*. 46, (2015), pp. 3-34. The ideas are elaborated in Krell’s *Ecstasy, Catastrophe: Heidegger from ‘Being and Time’ to the ‘Black Notebooks’*. Albany: SUNY Press, 2015.

The 'always already' situates itself in a very different space from plot-driven works that concern themselves with what I call 'cumulative' writing: this follows that, this causes that and so on. The 'always already' is apocalyptic, because it carries with it overtones of inevitability, even destiny. If something is 'always already happening' then it has happened for all time, and continues to do so. In this way, ecstatic literature posits temporality as something somewhat dreadful, destined to repeat⁷⁵ and to a non-determinate or non-existent end. To use an example from Krell, who references the children's nursery rhyme Humpty Dumpty, ecstatic writing depicts not the story of Humpty's fall from the wall, but the 'feeling' (closely related to that of the 'uncanny') of dread, that Humpty is 'always already' gone, destroyed. Krell also refers to a child's game of *fort-da* or 'gone-there' that the child uses to console themselves as to their mother's disappearance for the day in order to go to work. The child creates a game whereby they can gain some complicity in the uncomfortably frightening and dismaying occurrence of the temporary disappearance of their mother or primary care-giver into a game that the child controls through his or her invention of the *fort-da* play. The 'always already' predicts loss and uncertainty that follows the perceiver around throughout all of his or her life. The catastrophe has already happened – so therefore it can be controlled. That is the apophatic 'hope' of the 'always already'.

⁷⁵ The idea of "the eternal recurrence" has been attributed to Indian religions as well as the Pythagoreans and the Stoics. The philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche wrote on this theme, especially in *The Gay Science*, "What if a demon crept after you into your loneliest loneliness some day or night, and said to you: "This life, as you live it at present, and have lived it, you must live it once more, and also innumerable times; and there will be nothing new in it, but every pain and every joy and every thought and every sigh, and all the unspeakably small and great in thy life must come to you again, and all in the same series and sequence - and similarly this spider and this moonlight among the trees, and similarly this moment, and I myself. The eternal sand-glass of existence will ever be turned once more, and you with it, you speck of dust!" - Would you not throw yourself down and gnash your teeth, and curse the demon that so spoke? Or have you once experienced a tremendous moment in which you would answer him: "You are a God, and never did I hear anything so divine!" If that thought acquired power over you as you are, it would transform you, and perhaps crush you; the question with regard to all and everything: "Do you want this once more, and also for innumerable times?" (Aphorism 341).

Krell further clarifies the point when he talks about the ‘always already’ being tied into notions of “the absolute past – of presence as the past of a future. *Le passé d’un avenir*, a phrase which Derrida does not elaborate but which he repeats eight times, and which we may perhaps read as ‘the (absolute) past of a (suddenly passing, that is, *ecstatic*, finite and ‘closed) future’”.

Furthermore, as Krell states, “[i]t seems to me that one could almost say that ecstatic temporality is *pregnant with* history, which is waiting to be born”. This notion is so subtle that it is akin to an enactment of narrative quick-sand, where things slip away before one has had time or space to describe them, citing Emmanuel Levinas’s “effort to invoke a past to which one has only a tenuous relation. It would be a past that has never been present and that therefore cannot be presentified, an *absolute* past, as it were”. Krell states that “Ecstasis is the *dérobement*, withdrawal, that can only be *traced*, never signified” (*Ecstasy, Catastrophe*, p. 227).

Later in this chapter I discuss the Derridean *trace*, which I interpret as relating to Macha in *The Year of Passages* as containing echoes of the Body Without Organs (BwO). Now we emphasize that the trace also refers to the act of narration itself, “[t]o give an account of it, to tell its tale, to tell stories about the ‘always already’, one will have to revert to *mythos* rather than *logos*. Such an account or tale would be...a narrative or story that is inherently dark or riddlesome, enigmatic...dreadful, uncanny.” The ‘always already’ is an enigmatic perspective of narration, depicting in creative work the possibilities afforded by a loosening of the common understanding of temporality as being a consecutive ordering of events.

Ecstatic temporality revolves around itself in a new kind of conception of time, treating events as eternally inevitable. The reader of ecstatic and apophatic fiction might therefore not be surprised at the kind of impression the ‘always already’ leaves upon them,

namely, that of a certain kind of ‘dread’ or ‘uncanny’ feeling as the principal narrative unfolds. The apophatic way seems pitted with holes, into which a narrative could fall into a kind of theoretical impasse. How does ecstatic writing address notions of the unsayable, the un-narratable?

Bensmaïa’s *The Year of Passages* offers the reader much scope for thought in this unusual vein. From the opening sentences of the book, the reader is informed that the narrator has ‘finally done it’, as if the very act of writing the work *Dead Letters* and furthermore, having the audacity and fortune to have these writings published has secured the writer’s ‘always already’ fate of having to go into exile as a consequence, which is brought about in the second part of the narrative. In this way, the author narrates from the point of view of the ‘always already’. The deed is always already done, the book has been written, it’s in the reader’s hands, it’s ‘alive’ and ‘happening’ and will happen indefinitely. The author of both *Dead Letters* and *The Year of Passages* is placed into exile in the second half of the narrative, so he fleshes out the ‘always already’ with thoughts on writing, on painting, on Algerian identity, on Algerian history, on Francophone literature and other themes besides, such as the rather devastating loss of Macha on the narrative, her unveiling as a machine rather than, or in addition to being, the author’s companion.

Within the space of the ‘always already’, very little room (if any) is given to denouement or stable plot development. In this way, Bensmaïa makes much of the apophatic potentialities of fiction when he presents to his reader such descriptive instances of apprehending the idea of ‘nothing left’, “how she *hits the nail on the head* when she says that *nothing, nothing more* of my writings and my hopes, *nothing remains* of all my crap, *nothing remains* of my rage, *there is nothing left* of my worries, *nothing more* of my moodiness, *nothing left* of my passions” (*The Year of Passages*, p. 62). The apophatic technique being used here is to create an excessive impression of a multitude of ‘nothing’ or ‘nothings’. So

many versions of ‘nothing’ and yet *something*, whether rage, moodiness, worries, passions – all of course, invisible ‘things’. In this way Bensmaïa creates a great deal of something within the riddle-me-speak of nothing. At the end of the above-quoted passage there are no fewer than twenty-five lines of a ‘footnote’. The apophatic resultant feeling is one, again, of eternity, of an inevitability, of a ‘never-ending’ aspect to the writing.

Riding does something similar in her stories, through the utilisation of direct address to the reader, appealing to them to accept that the story has changed, key elements have been changed and so it is the ‘end’ but ‘not-end’ of the story, “But don’t you see, my dears, that the scene has shifted?”⁷⁶ Similarly, “Will the need for narrativizing never cease?” seems to be one of the questions Bensmaïa’s narrative creates. Riding explores ideas around narrativising in her characterization of the Story-pig object who “gorges” on the “idle thoughts of the hotel guests” and “turned them into stories in his belly” which he recounts over to himself “all night” “fancying he stepped this way, and that” (“The Story-Pig”, p. 167). There seems to be a concomitant desire to see the stories stopped for the story-pig and yet, also in the way that good stories want them to go – in that they never stop. In *The Year of Passages* the narrator switches to the voice of the well-meaning officials in their informing the narrator of the necessity of his immediate exile, and even though the tone is humourous and ironic, there are present references to the ‘always already’ and the proclivity toward narrating everything, “*Is this finally the beginning of a story that will surreptitiously be inserted here?*” (*The Year of Passages*, p. 77), and “what intrigues them is that a book can kill a person!” (p. 83). The theme of narrative fate and fatality is expressed by Bensmaïa through his attention to the ‘always already’ and even the act of narration itself is brought into question.

⁷⁶ Riding, “The Story-Pig”, in *Progress of Stories*, p. 182.

The Refusal of the Face; De-territorialisation

Part of this discussion has explored notions of visibility and invisibility as being one of the central concerns of ecstatic literature. This broad term of focus includes concomitant themes such as seeing, blindness, vision, blocked vision, being and appearance – or ‘being in itself’ as opposed to ‘being visible to others’. There is a very distinct sense in *The Year of Passages* that the author/narrator resents the fact of ‘being visible to others’ in the case whereby the narrator supposedly writes to the ambassador of his country, saying that because of the unfair pressure to show one’s face, over and over again, that is therefore testament to the bureaucratic ‘torture’ of travelling under an (Algerian) identity – therefore deciding to renounce his (Algerian) identity, indeed, to leave the question to ‘whomever’, “I’ve firmly and solemnly decided to donate my Algerian nationality to the camels, and to everyone else!” (p. 21).

The ecstatic element at play in Bensmaïa’s narrative includes a kind of voyeurism that the reader senses that they are not only reading about but themselves committing, just by virtue of reading *The Year of Passages*, a book about a banned book – and a banned human. Here the reader can note the writer’s exploration of the themes of the self and the other in the idea of the face of the other and a mirror, respectively. He also makes oblique reference to the skull and concomitantly, to death. Perhaps the skull could be seen as the ultimate *trace* of existence, of being human. That book is identifiable by its author, in particular, by the author’s face. The book performs the idea that deterritorialization in the extreme could be a desire to escape the face, to escape subjectivity. It could also be said that the face is focussed on as a keen point of the problem of visibility to others. Bensmaïa has his narrator arc in verbal gymnastics to illustrate his keen disillusionment:

Seeing parading at least a hundred different people. Seeing passing before my eyes a good hundred people. Seeing being eyed by another hundred. Seeing still another

hundred pushed getting pushed around.... And nothing to say. *Rien à déchiffrer!* Not a single face to stare down! Not a single face that is worth my effort to stare it down!
(*The Year of Passages*, p. 27)

There is also a desire on the part of the narrator to see, yet to remain unseen. In the world which mirrors the position of the reader, of bureaucratic brick walls, there are many factors bearing upon the narrator, stifling the author's creativity and dominating his time. Naïve "pretty blond-haired students" who get his name wrong, required letters of recommendation, being photographed 'against one's will', the necessary obligation to provide copies of such things as birth certificates and identification papers, invitations to speak at conferences printed on embossed paper, all these are forms of recapitulation and 'immatriculation' (Bensmaïa's term) which cause the narrator to invoke his own loss of statehood caused by the lack or forfeiture of national citizenship. In *The Year of Passages* the narrator states, "I believed that in principle a free man had won the right to no longer hide his face, but not to *put it on display*." (p. 15). The idea that Bensmaïa presents to his readers is perhaps to offer a glimpse, however furtive, of a *faceless* entity *looking outward*, at others and at the world – but to add complexity to the author's position, the necessary presenting of himself as being a *marked man*, an Arab, an Algerian man, with all of the attendant guilt and dismay of the shock of the recent wars etched upon his face, "because of the basic paranoid personality afflicting most Algerians, because of the Algerian War and in name of its martyrs, *a face has been foisted on us*" (p. 16).

This leads us to the second major focussing theme that is repeated throughout *The Year of Passages*, which is de-territorialisation. All along, Bensmaïa has been exploring issues of nationhood, of *not belonging*, of necessary exile, forced exit and attendant anguish that is experienced by the narrator. This idea of collapsed nationhood is not merely a straightforward affiliation with the severing of ties with one's country of birth. It has already

been mentioned that Bensmaïa wishes to collapse clichéd notions of ‘belonging’, in his frequent references to complete renunciation: “I’ve firmly and solemnly decided to donate my Algerian nationality to Algeria, to the camels and to everyone else!” (p. 13). The author-narrator bemoans the fact that the national art gallery of Algeria has only scant Algerian artists on display (“Not a single Baya, do you understand?”; p. 72) and instead prefers the French in a somewhat preposterous and pretentious manner, just like the literary establishment, with its endorsement of certain authors. But at the same time, the narrator also questions the feasibility of the festival of Ramadan, for example, and the over-arching masculinity of the Algerian culture. When he mentions Algerians, he is often self-deprecating to the point of causing offence, or perhaps, offering an ironic comment on how Algerian people are perceived: “*All-gerian-for-nothin, Algérien-rien*, that’s the formula! and in two languages, yes! Hey, Mister, Hasnot! The, the El, the El jeer riant! The Algaerian, the green card scum!” (p. 13); “The *borderline cases* can go to the fairy Morgana or to Sinbad of a thousand and one nights!... We’ve got to organize festivals for these asses and the others, for Algeria, for the Maghreb!” (p. 6). Earlier in *The Year of Passages* the narrator is even more explicit:

Nigger trash! *Ratons! Khorotos! Beurs! Robbeurs! Rainers! Bicos! Assholes!*
Stinkers!

Arabs! Rilers!... Arabuggers! Arababblers! Arabums! ... Muzzling Muslims!

Moslemouseshits! And even before you had time enough to get over your independence, *Congratulations for your big fat baby, Madame Algeria bedecked in flowers!* (p. 5). Bensmaïa seems to be exposing the way in which for the last few decades, Muslim peoples have been both demonized and marginalised, as if everyone wanted them ‘banished’. Far from presenting an idealized version of “the perfect Arab man”, the author-narrator in

this work is at times ironic at times anxious and irritable toward his nationhood and his own future, as well as the future of Algeria as a nation state.

Derrida, a fellow French Algerian, expresses similar concerns: “I don’t like looking at my own face in the mirror. I don’t like it”. The reader is made aware of the impossibility of innocence, or of a life ‘of sensations rather than thoughts’. Bensmaïa points out in his non-fiction work, *Experimental Nations or The Invention of the Maghreb* that he wants language to be able to, “lead language slowly, step by step, *into the desert*, ‘to scream’, to give a syntax to screaming...Schizophrenia and language!”⁷⁷

We can readily perceive *The Year of Passages* as responding to Bensmaïa’s own critical call. The narrator implies a pre-occupation with achieving a complete renunciation and selfremoval, with attaining in literary representation the enactment of, to use Derrida’s term, *une sortie hors de soi*, ‘an exit out of oneself’. He will begin with photographs, with refusing to show his face, “for me photos are the most depressing, the most painful, the most trying of all” (p. 15). Interpreting ‘becoming minoritarian’, Bensmaïa writes, “All exile presupposes a centre, a point of origin from which one stands or moves away”.⁷⁸ Exile, moving away, refusal of faciality implies a certain apophatic tendency, not to appear in chronological order in an attempt to ‘mirror the world’ through writing, but instead to deal in ‘negative’ destinations that are not peopled with family or friends with his narrator, author of *Dead Letters*. Insisting on becoming minoritarian is directly connected with refusing the map of the face.

It enhances the subtle level of understanding of how this technique, this shying-away from presenting one’s face, *apostrophein*, again appears, this time as interpreted by Bensmaïa. It is pertinent to note here that the writer has published several books on the

⁷⁷ Bensmaïa, *Experimental Nations or The Invention of the Maghreb*, *op. cit.*

⁷⁸ *ibid.* p. 44.

literary and social critics Deleuze and Guattari. In their *A Thousand Plateaus, Capitalism and Schizophrenia* they state that “[t]he head is included in the body, but the face is not. The face is a surface...the face is a map”.⁷⁸ Similarly, Deleuze and Guattari state, “if human beings have a destiny, it is rather to escape the face, to dismantle the face and facializations, to become imperceptible, to become clandestine”.⁷⁹ *The Year of Passages* shares this drive even as its vocal language seems to shout at the top of its lungs.

In *Riding*, the topic and theme of the face is dealt with by refusing to describe the characterological face. Both Bensmaïa and *Riding* provide scant descriptions of the appearance of their characters, and of themselves when they are inhabiting overt author descriptions. *Riding* never describes faces and Bensmaïa speaks about his face but never describes it, as he also shies away from describing the face of anyone else. For Bensmaïa the face is a kind of identity card, and certainly most people would associate their entire selves when they see a picture of their face, confirming “that’s me” for instance. Deleuze and Guattari go on to say, “[t]he face is the typical European, what Ezra Pound called the average sensual man, in short, the ordinary everyday Erotomaniac”.⁸⁰ *Faciality* also offers scope for the eroticization of the individual.

Rejection of eroticization is indicative of a post-humanist reading of the text. For instance, the author shows the erotomaniac to be frustrated by his partner Macha being merely a machine, a not-woman. Not only a not-woman but not able to be ‘ravished’ or ‘taken’ sexually. The author shows just how un-erotic a machine can be, thereby highlighting and at the same time, almost sanctifying the female character through having a not-woman, nothuman machine as the figure of Macha. Bensmaïa also comments on the

⁷⁸ Deleuze and Guattari, “Year Zero: Faciality” in *A Thousand Plateaus, Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, p. 170.

⁷⁹ *Ibid*, p. 171.

⁸⁰ Deleuze and Guattari, *op. cit.*, p. 176.

erotomania present in contemporary society in *The Year of Passages*, to great comic effect, as the reader follows the somewhat delirious tone established in the beginning of the text, saying, “Without a libido fix, I’ll die!” Indeed, the narrative seems to be quite concerned with making eroticism appear to the reader and the writer as absurd and silly, for example when the writer describes a sexual act with Macha, who the reader later finds out is also a machine, not just a human, so the scene could therefore be pure satire on how we today interact and rely on machines to an unacceptable extent, worthy of parody. Macha excites the narrator, and it is Macha who also acts as nullifier of the erotic drive, igniting both arousal and anti-climactic moments, “[a] little cup of slightly acidic honey at the base of the thighs! A choice morsel! It makes me horny! I try to graze, I begin to lick her softly, but Macha’s tickled crazy, she can’t stand it, she thinks I’m a pig, *I’m for naught, that makes my dick go limp, why don’t you bite my neck...*” (p. 37). Bensmaïa comments on the body that it has become too reliant on machines ‘to make it go’, and so makes a wry observation on the existence of people whose lives are, today more than ever, “traversed by machines. The schizophrenic lives in machines, alongside machines, or the machines are in him, in her.... Once the organs have been connected to a power, once they have been plugged into flows, the organs comprise larger, disparate machines”.⁸¹ The author also makes a comment on the proliferation of pro-erotica material, such as advertising in the implications of a criticism of the erotic drive – if for no less than “bringing another brat into this world!” and by increasing the world’s population, increasing the demands made on an always already fragile earth. In the claustrophobia of the attic where he furtively tries to seduce his wife-machine, Macha, Bensmaïa reminds his reader of how machines and the manufacture and wide-spread proliferation of machines exist because of desire. This same desire is exploited in order to

⁸¹ Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *Two Regimes of Madness – Texts and Interviews*. David Lapoujade (ed.), Ames Hodges and Mike Tavormina (tr.). London: Semiotext(e), 2007, p. 17.

sell the latest versions of the smartphone or iPhone for example. This idea applies to the use of the internet, chat rooms, dating sites, shopping sites and so on. In our day-to-day lives we interface with machines for a great deal of our lives. Just one step away from this erotic desire comes total desire and total control of the machine over our lives, as many of us are at least half-way there to being totally reliant on machines. Building on this theme, the writer also instigates the general feeling of disorientation and disillusionment at the very fact of existence, “Will he dance? Will he eat? Will he go crazy? Will he sleep? Will he get on with it? Why the hell do we have so many machines to do the crap we do?” (p. 3).

So if the reader is left with the vision or refusal of the face, as in *The Year of Passages*, for the author’s appearance is left undescribed, in the sense of ‘appearance’ ‘uniqueness’ and ‘face’ being equivalent. Instead, ecstatically, the work starts off as a ‘voice’ but also transcends its own voice, through structuring the narrative according to ‘Scolium 1-6’ or ‘Sync 1-6’ and inserting poetic excerpts throughout, utilising various languages (Italian, Farsi, Latin, English). There are different novel-machines at work here in *The Year of Passages*. The idea is explored of the fact of the narrative impulse as it approaches the point of communicating with an imaginary ‘reader’ and all of the attending questions and concerns, but in an ironic way, “[c]hoices are guided by faces, elements are organized around faces.... The face is a veritable megaphone”.⁸² The author is ‘hiding’ the face of the book by de-territorializing its elements so we cannot look it in the eye.

In apophatic writing, the face is often refused to the reader. Ecstatic writing refuses facial descriptions so that the reader will have to imagine the facial features themselves, creating a kind of ‘smudge’ or ‘blurry’ veil over the face, a distinctly apophatic realisation acquired in reading ecstatic writing. Ella Briens comments on how Deleuze and Guattari

⁸² Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, *op. cit.*, p. 179.

“use the example of the face or ‘faciality’ to discuss how a surface...is signified as something, as someone.”⁸³ The information garnered from Brians’ article was to do with positing Deleuzean thought as though they were asking the reader to be critical of the socially constructed, social coded, but naturalized face and the underlying logic that supports it. In doing so, they suggest that ‘the body’ is always more than its biological parts or fleshy boundaries. In the light of ecstatic writing, that explores the ideas of blindness, of refusing faciality, the writer is writing apophatically because he turns away from the naturalist writer’s claimed obligation to render people and their surroundings in a realist descriptive manner.

In contrast to ideas of apophatic excess, the narrator is also constantly being ‘reduced’. Either by being requested to furnish his visa applications with photographs of his own face, which he resents having to see himself, let alone allow others to have hard copy images of his face or having little to no contact with any other significant character, the narrator is constantly creating and un-creating, destroying and building again. There is a sense that the narrator is constantly ‘starting over’ and longing for some kind of oasis in the frightening picture of a cold and bleak world.

Late in the first half of *The Year of Passages* anamorphosis is acting as an agent of reduction, as in the following example:

SUN

CINDERS

MEMORY

SKULL

LITERATURE (p 42).

⁸³ Brians, *op. cit.* p 29.

The narrator wishes to communicate the significance of such a weighty insight to Macha, but decides against it when he realises that he would be making as much sense as a ‘mad man’ if he did. The narrator produces the formula ‘SSCML’ which is an acronym for ‘sun-skull-cindersmemory-literature’ and in doing so, finds a temporary ‘answer’ to all of his irritable, ironic and delirious questioning of existence. Through reducing the word to its individual letters, Bensmaïa gives the reader a new perspective on language as it seems to be made to speak ‘of itself, to paradoxically elaborate on itself. When he writes, “*from Aely’s Black Notebook. ‘In the French tromperie there is the word trope! In figure there’s a fig! In literature there is [to a higher power] the words litter and atchure! Too many literary aches, hatchers, spoiled and stillborn litters!’*” (p. 38) the reader encounters the technique of reduction at work – creating a plethora or excess out of supposed ‘subtraction’ of narrative elements. Here we have an example which is repeated throughout the text of the case of de-territorialization happening within the word, and happening even within the level of interchangeable letters within the word.

His depiction of the use of an acronym as the ‘answer to everything’, to any philosophical (or other) problem is a device used to set meta-textual ideas next to notions of existence. It is a method used by the narrator to understand and comprehend the world around him through words. It is by virtue of looking away from the world that he finds a way of transcribing his experience. Through the act of writing and reading and re-reading and finding smaller words inside bigger words that seem to echo the meaning of the word itself, the narrator gets closer to and further away from the final ‘illumination’ which will be ‘the truth to end all truths’. The kinds of feats achieved by apophatic narrative encompasses ideas of revolt against the (written) word, so that the reader is able to question the very act of writing, reading and publishing books – for example, the (hypothetical?) *Dead Letters*.

Apophatic writing will often enter into discussions around ‘economies ‘of subtraction, of reserve and of excess. Georges Bataille, in “The Notion of Expenditure” (1933) describes the bourgeoisie in showing their world-view to be largely characterized by bourgeois persons as being “distinguished itself from the aristocracy through the fact that it has consented to *spend for itself*, and within itself – in other words, by hiding its expenditures as much as possible from the eyes of the other classes”.⁸⁴ I am mentioning the bourgeois because as discussed earlier, the narrator is magnified and reduced as he is sent into suburban ‘hell’ – houses and shopping malls, everything homogenised to be exactly the same as everywhere else, veritably committing him to “literary and intellectual suicide”, “[i]n sending me off to Minneapolis by inviting me to *go and bury myself alive* in Minneapolis....By protecting me the way you do, you’re not protecting me, *you don’t protect writers from their destiny*” (p. 72). The narrator will enact a series of reductions, including his own self-burial alive if necessary. This series is necessarily apophatic in description because they are performing an apophatic concern, namely that of reducing the story as well as the narrator to the ‘bare bones’ truth.

What does this say about a character, if they are consistently disappearing? In the previous chapter I quoted Susan Schultz, who discussed Riding’s main concerns as “being, thinking and disappearing”. Bensmaïa similarly is preoccupied with the apophatic notions of being, thinking and disappearing. Couched into the idea of ‘disappearing’ is the apophatic technique of *apostrophein*, turning away. The bourgeois environment is too stifling for the Storypig object, and it skips out of the window and into the moon (at which, the moon promptly sets, ecstatically). In Riding’s “The Story-pig” the character’ in the form of the Story-pig object retains both the hotel guests’ stories and money inside of itself, and as we have already analysed, the narrative performs economies of reserve. So, too, in

⁸⁴ Georges Bataille, “Notions of Expenditure” *op. cit.*, p. 124.

The Year of Passages, the narrator-protagonist is being stifled on all sides, including his job, “*Herr Professor!*” and longs to escape the confines of suburban life in part two. *The Year of Passages* is an apophatic work.

Ecstatic writing, as we have seen, differentiates itself from dealing with themes regarding expense and loss, silence and invisibility and whittling down or reduction. We have seen in *The Year of Passages* how a disappearing character is featured in the characterisation of Macha but also, through the intermediary of Aely (the narrator’s ‘sub-conscious’) the reader is also exposed to intermingling and vanishing words. For instance, Aely is consistently breaking apart words and making new words out of one word, “Aely’s blue notebook: *In misericord there is chord and misery!*” (p. 38) and similarly, “Aely: *In esprit there are tripes, in gust there is lust!*” (p. 18).

The apophatic nature of the hermeneutical lens used to examine and identify such texts as apophatic or cataphatic has been established earlier in this thesis. It is through “negative capability”⁸⁵ that these apophatic themes are achieved in narrative representation. But what is meant by the idea of economies of expenditure? I argue that when the writer combines notions of ontological fluidity (Macha, the Story-pig object, Rose and Hans experience this quality), oxymoronic descriptions, and internal description or vision in order to attain a strange and ecstatic quality to their writing, another important emphasis is needed for the reader to apprehend that this is finally, an apophatic text. That emphasis has been described in the chapter on Laura Riding’s fiction as ‘designed waste’ and in *The Year of Passages* the reader is supplied with another reading or enactment of designed waste. As we have discussed, ecstatic writing is necessarily concerned with *apophasis*. Works such as Jean

⁸⁵ Keats wrote to his brothers George and Thomas on the 22nd December, 1817: “and at once it struck me what quality went to form a Man of Achievement, especially in Literature, and which Shakespeare possessed so enormously—I mean Negative Capability, that is, when a man is capable of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason.” (Extract from Keats Public Library collection).

Cocteau's *Les Enfants Terribles* or Céline's *Journey to the End of the Night* are distinguished as ecstatic writing not only by virtue of the style of narration, for ecstatic writing may adopt any point of view for the telling of the story itself, even third-person omniscient, but also for the way in which such narration chooses to align itself in their choice of themes. Both of the works mentioned are, for instance, haunted by death and uselessness (the soldiers in *Journey* head toward their deaths to a cheering mob backdrop; the children in Cocteau's novella are haunted by the death of their mother and the near-death of the child Dargelos, they try to cope with their situation by means of a secret 'game' that involves squirreling away various 'treasures' that have a cryptic value that only the children know). A book which uses apophasis as a kind of hermeneutical or anamorphic lens through which to view reality can be realised when attention is given to enacting apophatic ideas, making it an *ecstatic work*. William Faulkner is another fine example of an ecstatic writer for his persistent explorations of temporality and language, for example, in *As I Lay Dying*.

In answer to the question, 'what is meant by economies of loss, expenditure, excess and reserve?' I owe the initial idea of 'economies' acting within narrative to the article by Bataille already mentioned. It is necessary and enlightening to talk about economies operating within the literary text because in an ecstatic reading, literature reflects 'real life' not in the way of mimetic representation, but in its acknowledgement of energy production and consumption, a basic fact of existence. Bataille's "mystic economies" allow the reader to view current economic and political factors in a critical way. Ecstatic writing, being concerned as it is with the *sortie une de soi* or 'an exit out of oneself' is achieved through adopting an apophatic 'lens' in order to represent, creatively, that literature which we can describe as *ecstatic*. When a character like Miss Banquett constantly undergoes the creation/destruction/creation cycle, or when "poor Mourad Bensmayer" persists through excess, exodus and ashes, the reader is exposed to the possibilities afforded to a narrative

that is not merely reducible to a forward-moving ‘plot’, but can instead recreate itself anew within its own structure and content. By always acknowledging death and the deadlands, Bensmaïa nevertheless keeps up an at times frantic, at other times almost inaudible narrative voice. How he plays with volume in a story is reflective of the kind of achievements that are possible within the genre of ecstatic writing. Similarly to how Riding refers to a sound being like “a loud quiet in the ears”, Bensmaïa masterfully explores how to make his intriguing monologue gain and grab the reader’s attention from the start, and then to ‘drop’ them into encountering poetry, Farsi script, notes from the subconscious (Aely) and notions of nothingness as being somehow required to counterbalance the excess that is all too visible and reactive upon the author’s present happiness.

Through paying close attention to the way that apophatic characters are ‘created’ through techniques of ‘un-creation’ such as Macha (the not -) and even the author-narrator himself, the reader is exposed to the possibilities afforded to apophatic writing. Through the themes associated with deterritorialization and exile, Bensmaïa manages to execute in literature what cannot be said in a cataphatic way – for notions of not-belonging, of exile, of nothingness, of deadlands and excessive noise and tumult and chaos all blend together to create this extraordinary apophatic and ecstatic narrative.

Macha the Wife-Machine

Macha, as an apophatic creation *par excellence* is – like God – without birth, without gender, not female, not made, not language, not volition, unnameable, unknowable and so forth. She is created *ex nihilo*, out of nothing, and so symbolises the ecstatic and apophatic concern with ontology and disappearance. Just as quickly as she appears, so too she disappears by the end of Part One of Bensmaïa’s narrative. As the narrator enthuses:

I always like to get back to Macha every time I find the right moment to utter a good word, an idiomatic expression, or an idiosyncratic sound! And, for some unknown innately genital reason, *no, no, no error, no rectification yet, please, not yet*, Macha always knows how to locate these brainstorm. She immediately guesses that something happened when the right moment seems to come in the course of the day. (*The Year of Passages*, p 19).

This ‘swooping’ action associated with the ontology of Macha is ecstatic, for to attain ecstasy is to achieve *une sortie hors de soi* or ‘an exit out of the self’ and is another interpretation of the ‘being, thinking and disappearing’ nature so prevalent in the characterisations of Riding’s prose (for example “The Story-Pig” and “Miss Banquett, or the Populating of Cosmania” for similar swooping and swerving characters). That is, they tend to swerve in and out of the narrative frame.

At the same time, Macha is also anamorphic⁸⁶. Her character is presented as the narrator’s companion, and mother of their children, as his sole companion (when the references to children disappear) and also as a truck, or a piece of computer-like machinery.

⁸⁶ The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines ‘anamorphosis’ as “A distorted projection or drawing which appears normal when viewed from a particular point or with a suitable mirror or lens.” A well-known example is Hans Holbein the Younger’s 1533 painting, ‘The Ambassadors’ (National Gallery, London) in which an object on the floor in the painting is revealed to be an elongated human skull, a reminder of ‘memento mori’ and *anamorphosis*.

Macha as a non-sentient companion shows how within apophasis, a myriad of possibilities is included in its narrative scope. Macha is an apophatic device of anti-climactic action, that causes the reader to question the text – for if she is not a woman, the author does not ‘fornicate’ with her, is not reassured by her, is not ‘rescued’ by her continually and yet she at times ‘is there’ also, as presented in the narrative. If she is not really there, who or what is there in her place? She is an apophatic creation because she is *not this* possibly more than what she *is*. What then happens to all of the author’s questions and anxieties about the nature of existence and other concerns? As Tom Conley elucidates in his Afterword, the figure of Macha is not a female, a woman but a machine, and there are clues to this part of her identity scattered throughout the text, for example, “[a]ddendum or how Macha turns into a *strader* (i.e. a Mack truck with a *front cab*).” (TYoP, p 37). One significance that the idea of Macha as machine has for apophasis is that the author raises questions as to the impossibility of real communication and connectivity with others.

Throughout the work, the narrator of *The Year of Passages* holds a tone of a person who is completely exasperated by the world that he finds himself inhabiting – that is, of *our* world, with its petty bureaucrats, adoration of machines and capital, and never-ceasing desire to prod its way through our most private thoughts and even our vulnerable faces. Our bodies are certainly targets, through supposed dissident behaviour against the ruling government. Bensmaïa seems to be questioning the very idea of nationhood, as he continually renounces his citizenship as an Algerian man. This last observation allows the reader to see the devastating effects of post-colonialism and war upon a nation and its people. Are there even any people any more? For the best seems to be alas, a *body without organs*, a machine.

Macha’s actual position is vague at the beginning; is she the narrator’s wife or his mistress? Or is she a figure that is post-human by being, as Conley suggests, a machine? The writer makes a strong hint about Macha’s machinic qualities when he comments on Macha

“having a front cab” and “Macha makes things go” but it is understandable if, for at least a third of the narrative, the reader is under the impression that Macha is the narrator’s wife and/or companion, a woman, a human being.

Macha is, apophatically, an example of Bensmaïa’s exploration of a figure that could be said to be representative of the Deleuzian ‘Body without Organs’, or ‘BwO’, an apophatic or ‘negative’ character who is not human and so cannot perform an anthropomorphised function. For a truck is literally, a body of metal and other materials and no organs, and Macha is indeed a truck, not a woman, not even sentient. Macha is also indicative of a post-human theme that I believe forms part of the hermeneutical lens of apophatic writing. Macha is *not born, not fallible, not there, not sentient*, a subterfuge and rather a devastating one at that – for if she is the one who calms and organises the narrator, and gives him even the motivation to ‘keep going’, and she *does not exist*, then where does that leave the narrator, and the reader? Quite alone, uncomfortably alone at times. What does this ‘aloneness’ effect invoke as opposed to realist literature?

Through notions of invisibility, through being not-there, the character of Macha can be contrasted with another other-worldly character, Aely, who could be described as being part of the author’s subconscious. Aely is distinguished by its schizophrenic compulsion to find, in words, an unceasing treasure-trove of other words and word-parts, “[a]n excerpt from Aely’s Black Notebook. ‘In the French tromperie there is the word trope! In figure there’s a fig! In literature there is [to a higher power] the words litter and atchure! Too many literary aches, hatchers, spoiled and stillborn litters!’” (p. 38). Unlike Macha, who seems to blithely accept everything and all words just as they are, Aely makes an excess of meaning out of words by breaking them down into what Aely sees as constitutive parts. Aely breaks things up, reinterprets words according to this destructive/recreative impulse whereas Macha helps the narrator to ‘continue’. The contrastive roles of Aely and Macha are alike to

the author's subconscious and the author's desire to connect and even to worship. Aely is the subterranean force that constantly looks to create and re-create meaning out of words and sentences, while Macha is the psychoanalytic agent of post-humanism. So then again, *ex nihilo*, the reader is provided with an excess of two characters who are 'not there'.

Their non-existent existence is ecstatic because it acts as one remove away from the necessary 'suspension of disbelief'. The reader of normative fiction knows that characters do not really exist, but in ecstatic fiction, the character's ontology tends to be slippery and unstable. Macha and Aely are apophatic because they are either not what they appear to be, although they encourage the author to continue (Macha for instance) or they are strangely driving the narrative but as a disembodied character (Aely for example). They are 'negative' characters who perform negative functions within the narrative also. For in *The Year of Passages* these two characters tease, cajole, deceive and confuse the narrator. They also do not 'exist', either completely like Aely the subconscious or partially, like Macha the woman does not exist. The significance for apophasis here is that apophatic literature is capable of creating characters and narrative action that springs from a 'negative' impetus. Attendant upon the ontological fluidity of the characters, and the strangeness of this kind of text, are paradox, contradiction and a new understanding of the possibilities of narrative representation of character.

Earlier I had examined how notions of excess and surplus are operating within apophasis. By listing the 'not ...' qualities, one creates a being that is charged with an impression of a plenitude of qualities that are in excess of the understanding of the quality referred to. For instance, as the introduction to this section examined, 'God' has been referred to as being 'not knowledge' and 'not intuition' by Dionysius. The reader is therefore able to imagine a being that is somehow greater than knowledge and intuition because outside them and yet encompassing their negatively-referenced potentials, a being that may

display these qualities but that any definitive statement – or cataphatic description – is inadequate to encompass. In *The Year of Passages*, in order to combat this apophatic cancellation of her ‘real form’ (that is, she *is* really also *a machine*), Bensmaïa creates an excess of qualities out of Macha: “Macha the provocatrix! Macha the muse of sleepy little poems! Macha the soul milker! Macha the betrayer! Macha the abandoness! Macha the donoress!” (p. 21). Bensmaïa thus explores notions of both reduction and excess, as well as evasion of certain identity, in his creation of Macha. She becomes like a ‘God’ figure, full of qualities and beyond all qualities. Replete and beyond, simultaneously.

This paradoxical apophasis technique is utilised by Bensmaïa throughout his text. The reader is reminded everywhere of the notion of excess and attendant suffocation and saturation, “They got you! All your nerves! All your lions! All your tigers! All your gazelles! All your Saharas! All your deserts! All your camels!” (p. 4). The author uses the theme of surplus to apophatic effect, so it is striking and ecstatic for the reader to encounter such interjections throughout the narrative such as, “*Everywhere it’s the same damned thing, the same décor, the same little drama...the universe repeats itself endlessly and stamps its feet without budging!*” (p. 24). In this latter example the reader is reminded of the immense weight of the world that, like the Story-pig object, is not able to move or even budge, even though it appears to want to *disappear*. Examples of the writer’s exploration of plenitude and excess occur frequently within the text, excess out of nothing or *ex nihilo*,

Hour after hour of waiting! Waves of boredom! The narrator *feels* he is at the end of the line. All these sleepless nights, all these long evenings without end, all these hikes in the mountains without any horizon in the distance, all these lies, all these aunts, cousins, mothers, all this democracy, all these rats in the streets, all this sterility, all this cowardice, all these women under veils, all these blind alleys, all this pretentiousness, all this muddle and mess, all these stupid political measures, all this

confusion, all these economic *errors*, all this tumbling down into the sea...all these cafés, all these bistros, all this Muslim wine, all this Muslim beer, all these Islamic liquors, all these orgies, all these rapes, all these Islamo-Marxist compromises...all these cultural mummies, all these thefts of language, all these rules of good conduct.
(p. 58)

Present within this extract are numerous references to being ‘Muslim’ and being somehow tricked into various nefarious political ideologies. Bensmaïa seems to be creating images out of very little, and they pile up so that they become a mountain of competing absolutes akin to their flip side: apophasis. All these “all these sleepless nights” and “all these long evenings without end” constitute a kind of *khora* ‘no-place’ of dread and darkness. The narrator echoes this in observations that the youth of a country that’s crumbling, the youth of a country that is howling, when everything *is swerving out of control* because of so much ignorance accumulated over aeons. It’s too late, there is so much accumulated idiocy, too much boredom heaped up;

it’s too late, there’s too much stockpiled imbecility. Too much hate where the country would be better served by cold blood; *the ravens of thought always crow too late*, the ravens always predict the coming of evil, the evil of the coming year, *Nevermore*, the evil of the expiring year,

before:

cold-bloodedness

cold-bloodedness above all else.

Let’s first of all write a *poem* with *cold blood*.

Afterward we shall drink the time of blood!⁸⁷ (p. 59)

From passages such as these, one would expect that Bensmaïa, through becoming minoritarian, sees this striving to be not without bloodshed and *casualties*. The implications of all this apophasis and excess relate directly to embodiment, to real political consequences for real beings.

These apophatic themes do not only apply to ideas of literary metaphor and technique, but also in the very method of approach to characterisation. As I have indicated, Macha the woman or wife-machine, and Aely the word-spirit, neither of whom *exist* as normative stable fictive characters, reappear throughout the narrative. As de Certeau has explored, the concept of the body is an important one in understanding *mystics*: “What is termed a rejection of “the body” or of “the world” – ascetic struggle, prophetic rupture...constitutes the point of departure for the task of offering a body to the spirit, of ‘incarnating’ discourse, giving truth a space in which to make itself manifest”.⁸⁸ It could be said that Macha is also an embodiment of the idea proposed by Deleuze and Guattari of The Body Without Organs or BwO. They write, “[t]he BwO is what remains when you take everything away. What you take away is precisely the phantasy, and significances and subjectifications as a whole”.⁸⁹ They also refer to the fact that “[w]e come to the gradual realization that the BwO is not at all the opposite of the organs. The organs are not its enemies. The enemy is the organism. The BwO is opposed not to the organs but to that organization of the organs called the organism”.⁹⁰ The idea of the BwO is closely tied to

⁸⁷ The latter part of this quotation builds on the images of death and cold-bloodedness as well as invoking an apocalyptic vision of “the time of blood” or of great bloodshed. This could be reference to the Algerian War, or it could refer to times of war in general.

⁸⁸ de Certeau, *The Mystic Fable*, *op. cit.*, p. 80.

⁸⁹ Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*. p. 151.

⁹⁰ *ibid.*, p. 159.

notions of post-humanism for it seems to point the way not toward humanism but to that which is nothuman, this here to point back toward the functions of Macha and Aely.

From *The Year of Passages* it can be noted that Macha is, with all of ‘her’ nullifying essence, a figure of ‘trace’. She is, but she is ‘not’ (possibly more than she ‘is’). She is an apophatic characterisation of the trace. I quote the following extract from Derrida on the trace, which I have meditated upon at length. To my mind, the trace can be summarised as being reduced to a rather too-basic formula of ‘*word + X = trace*’ or, as Derrida more poetically termed it as being,

I leave a piece of paper behind, I go away, I die: it is impossible to escape this structure, it is the unchanging form of my life. Each time I let something go, each time some trace leaves me, ‘proceeds’ from me...I live my death in writing. ... Who is going to inherit, and how? Will there even be any heirs?⁹¹

Bensmaïa’s characterizations of Macha arguably makes us see ‘she/it’ as the ‘non’ figure who is able to enact ideas of the ultimate de-territorialization to become the ‘trace’ of a real human being. In an extract that will be discussed in more detail toward the end of this chapter, Krell quotes Derrida saying, “[t]his trace effacing the trace of the present in language is the unity of metaphoricity and non-metaphoricity as the unity of language”.⁹² I would suggest that Bensmaïa is exploring how language can be seen as a multi-faceted tool within which one can make language perform feats such as the nullification and heightening of the human form in the machine/woman Macha.

⁹¹ *ibid.*, p. 114-115.

⁹² Krell, “History, Natality and Ecstasy – Derrida’s First Seminars on Heidegger 1964 – 1965.” *Research in Phenomenology*, 46, (2015), pp. 3-34. ⁹⁵ *ibid.*

⁹⁶ Ella Briens. Chapter six, ‘The Virtual Body and the Strange Persistence of the Flesh: Deleuze, Cyberspace and the Posthuman’, from *Deleuze and the Body*. Laura Guillaume and Joe Hughes, (eds.), Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2011. ProQuest EBook Central, accessed 7th March, 2018, p. 117.

Bensmaïa also seems to be reminding his readers that the dismaying trend in the modern day are general worldwide moves toward technological bias and the overuse of machines: “Why do we have so many machines to do the crap we do?” the narrator asks on the first page of *The Year of Passages*. Macha, as an almost sinister subterfuge is a warning against getting ‘too close’ to machines, to become too reliant upon them to fill whatever existential problems might confront a person. The Deleuzian BwO is also machinic because it could not operate as being otherwise: it is not wholly human. The ‘trace’ relates to the BwO in the sense that they operate to accentuate humanism in a sense, by a process of taking away or reduction. Krell states further writes, “[We may read] ‘history’ crossed-through or ‘history’ in such a way that what we read beneath the *x* is ‘story’ or ‘narrative’”.⁹⁵

In her article “The Virtual Body and the Strange Persistence of the Flesh: Deleuze, Cyberspace and the Posthuman, Ella Brians explores the idea of the merging of technology and humankind, concentrating in particular upon Deleuze’s theories and ideas to do with transcendence, ‘post humanism’ and techno-culture in general by concentrating her focus on Deleuze’s position on the “central question of the body, its materiality and its relation to identity”⁹³ She goes on to remind the reader of “Deleuze’s materialism and his repeated rejection of any transcendent worldview”.⁹⁴ How does ecstatic writing interact with and react to notions of transcendence in twentieth-century works? Brians again writes,

[f]rom its beginnings, the technofantasy of cyber space has been characterized by both the desire to escape the body and the belief that cyber technologies (however these are conceived) will make this escape possible – if not now, then tomorrow. In other words, the imaginary of cyberspace is invested in a notion of transcendence:

⁹³ Ella Brians. Chapter six, ‘The Virtual Body and the Strange Persistence of the Flesh: Deleuze, Cyberspace and the Posthuman’, from *Deleuze and the Body*. Laura Guillaume and Joe Hughes, (eds.), Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2011. ProQuest EBook Central, accessed 7th March, 2018, p 117.

⁹⁴ *ibid.*, p 118.

specifically transcendence of the body and its perceived material limits. Many critics...have pointed out the religious, and specifically Christian, qualities of such thought.... Others, like Eric Davis, have noted its relation to Gnostic and magical thinking, with its focus on a nonmaterial realm of spiritual knowledge.⁹⁵

We can apply these notions of transcendence of the body in the characterization of Macha. The Gnostic attitude being quite a complex set of beliefs and of perceiving the self as well as the 'God-force' is appropriate here because the Gnostic view preferences such behaviour as renunciation and chastity. Macha could be seen as achieving this state of existence, being without desire or memory. This latter point is of significance because Macha is drawn to be a forward-motion character, who always 'keeps going' without looking back.

Bensmaïa, in his creation of Macha the not-woman machine has represented in fiction a paradoxical-excess of apophasis character. He does this in several ways: by making points of similarity between God and Macha; by making Macha sometimes quite femmedomestic (constantly reassuring the narrator, bossing him gently); by presenting Macha as without birth, parent-less; by presenting her as both solid-state and dynamic: not changing, not staying still. In Derrida's essay 'How to Avoid Speaking – Denials', the reader finds in the footnotes⁹⁶ that the word God is written and then crossed through with an X, or God.⁹⁷ The word of 'God' crossed through would in this analysis be leaving a trace. God would become 'not-God'. God crossed through or God is an apophatic technique, if you like, for another interpretation of the basis of the term 'designed waste' where things are stated, in this example, 'God' and then put under erasure, *sous rature*. He may be making an atheist

⁹⁵ *ibid.*, p 122.

⁹⁶ See Jacques Derrida – *Key Concepts*. Claire Colebrook (ed.), *op. cit.*, footnote 29, p 141.

⁹⁷ See G. Douglas Atkins, *Reading Deconstruction/Deconstructive Reading*. Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1983. "He {Derrida} writes a word, crosses it out and prints both word and deletion, for though the word is inaccurate it is necessary and must remain legible. The idea of *sous rature* is an analogue of the undoing/preserving play that...characterizes, indeed creates Derridean thought and so distinguishes it from Saussurean."

statement in having his character of Macha nothing and everything but a machine. Not to mention the heresy of a struck-through name of God as well as the heresy of a fictive character who refuses to fulfil a stable function in the narrative – which is, in *The Year of Passages*, a plethora of multi-narratives.

The trace and the BwO idea are both apophatic. The trace is apophatic in the sense that it deals in the economy of excess, remainder, surplus, over-flow in the economies of expenditure. By this I mean expenditure of energies – so if the Story-pig object is itself an object/character of retention, a BwO, that makes a BwO also apophatic. Apophatic because it is an object that has no organs, no sentience, no life yet simultaneously has an excess of non-qualities. We have to use negative terms when describing apophatic or negative subjects and objects. This is because it is a term that can refer to an object or character that is without human characteristics, that is chiefly a non-character. In *The Year of Passages* that BwO is Macha. Aely, as a kind of invisible spirit that is however able to ‘splinter everything’ into reduced parts, thereby creating an excess out of terms, an excess of multitude and an excess of impressions. Tellingly, neither Macha nor Aely exist in the book’s physically present realm, so they are apophatic and even possibly imaginary, even in the boundaries of the narrative itself. Macha encapsulates passive, performed anamorphosis (from the narrator’s point of view); whereas Aely is an active, creating agent of anamorphosis.

Passages and Exile

The title of *The Year of Passages* indicates how the narrative has been both conceived and performed in relation to the idea of passage. There are many references to passage as space, and spaces are often claustrophobic, unfertile and chaotic, so passages are not necessarily through-lines here as the narrator is forced to continue living and writing:

“Again, I’m in the café. *Do you remember the whirling dervishes that I had a chance to see*

in Istanbul? You're whirling, you're whirling, you're whirling about yourself and you're the only one not to see that you're whirling around a void!" (p 41). Sometimes the scenes the author paints are dizzyingly amusing in their repetitive patterns, and at other times the narrator shows the reader a nightmare, apocalyptic vision through his evocation of spaces:

In a corner of the studio, in the middle of this shambles, a body that has just been liquefied or that is being put back together, and over there, where the body is at the strongest point of its attempt to expulse its form, there's the fluid of a deranged idiot who cries in silence...*an atrociously molded face: the last of our faces in the final night of our world!* (p 9).

As is customary in the book's extreme visions, the body plays an important part in *The Year of Passages*. From the beginning of the narrative, the narrator decries the state of Francophone (phoney) writing and pictorial art, saying "they painted everything, of course...but not the nerves!" (p 3).

Despite the relative novelty of Bensmaïa's style, his excesses are explicitly situated in relation to his Algerian and French literary situation. He has his 'unfortunately wise' narrator parody the situation, "[w]e couldn't care less about Camus, but uh oh, not Céline! Okay for Jean-Saul Tartre, but Céline, in no way! It's too much *for you!* Too dangerous for you!" (p 7). This is a controversial stance to take, given the infamy associated with Céline who has already been mentioned twice in this study, and credited with the ecstatic technique of consistent use of the exclamation mark, which Bensmaïa uses, to considerable comic effect, "[h]ands off our literary winterdrome! Don't touch! Des Touches! Touch-him-not!" (*ibid.*). Céline has largely been ignored post World War Two because of his creation of several extreme-right Anti-Semitic pamphlets. Some say these were commissioned by the Nazi party, and it comes across as a forbidden act or *d'interdit* or taboo that offends the moral conscience to defend such a writer as Céline. The translator to *The Year of Passages*,

Tom Conley, has also commented on this fact, writing in his afterword that in the book “[a]lmost every canonical author of twentieth century France is parodied. But above all it is Céline who offers a mechanism that set language and the social drive into motion...making the first-person narrator the object of his own ridicule” (Conley, ‘Afterword’ to *The Year of Passages*. *op. cit.* p 144). Certainly, the narrator in the text is self-deprecating in the extreme, and speaks of “Arabbuggers! Mosle mouse-shits!” and so forth. Skin colour, the facial features, being marks of identifying one person from another are both themes that the narrator tries to refuse to show on his own behalf, for fear of being classified once and for all. There is a distinct sense of willed exit or escape from the situation, a constant bird-like sense that the narrator could ‘up and fly away’ at any point in the narrative.

Here within the narratorial and cultural situations of the book we see the trace operate: Derrida writes, “[m]y death is...not some contingent event that may one day befall the trace I produce...rather, my disappearance or my death is the very condition of the production of the trace.”⁹⁸ Being and disappearing are an integral part of the ecstatic writer’s oeuvre. Here we can see, having applied a Derridean reading to the phenomenon, that the trace reappears to show itself again in the text, for there is a sense that the body, once born, is of course destined to disappear or to disintegrate – and what will be left behind? Nothing but bones, eviscerated texts.

Passage, then, is also passage through various kinds of death – of self, of cultural identity, of narrative telos. We could take this metaphor of the non-deciduous bone to be exploited by Bensmaïa in a structural sense in two ways: firstly, by following ‘lines of passage’ and secondly, by including the theme of death as forming a good deal of the content of the narrative. His narrator, “poor Monsieur Rmad” “R.B.” reduces everything to the acronym ‘Sun-Skull...’ and the book itself can be read from any point, not necessarily from

⁹⁸ Quoted in Michael Naas, *Derrida From Now On*. New York: Fordham University Press, 2008, p 114.

the beginning. It is interesting to note that exactly half-way through the total sum pages of the text, part two begins. This separation of the work into two equal parts can also be taken in account by the ending of the text, which contains a footnote – implying that the last word isn't the last after all. There will always be more to say, there will always be more language to fill the strange void of existence. Like passage, which is also never-ending.

Bodies have space, have passages in the forms of cavities, bone, veins and so on and they also live in and around varying spaces, such as homes, offices, operating rooms, lecture theatres, roads, bodies of water, and so on, through to outer space. The idea of death is closely attendant upon us at each moment of the day. In *The Year of Passages* there is a desire on the part of the author to escape – to escape his face, his nationality, his race, his book, his students, his neighbours in Minneapolis, embossing officials, a *fatwa*. For comparison, Laura Riding in “Miss Banquett, or the Populating of Cosmania” has her heroine ‘die each day’ and wake up in a ‘new world’, exploring different ideas of entrapment and escape from situations. By implying entrapment, through creating what is almost a suffocating text in the sense that it is very dense with the smoke and ashes of yesterday’s dreams of the modern Algerian.

The terms ‘exile’ and ‘passages’ ‘transcendence’ and ‘post-humanism’ could all be understood and defined as being apophatic areas of affiliation. What is meant by this is that exile implies a highly necessary escape, under orders and threat, to an unknown place or *khora* (or ‘no-where’ ‘no-place’) that symbolizes safety for the individual. What are the narrator’s peregrinations but botched attempts to find places of refuge? For the comfort comes not from the grave but somehow in the very act of writing, “No love! No subject! No history! No story! No fabulosities! Only relations! Only transitions! Only passages! Only networks! Skeins of nerves! ... Gotta write for nerves, Mourad, ya gotta wrote with your nerves, not with your guts!” (p 3).

The word ‘passages’ is apophatic because it is concerned with the ‘in-between’ in literature, with subterfuge and concealment. One would use a passage in order to get to somewhere else, whilst remaining safe because ‘out of sight’. Passages must be made and crossed within a post-colonial reading of ecstatic literature because writers have to find passage, or access to the general population within the publication of their works.⁹⁹ The terms ‘transcendence’ and ‘post-humanism’ are also considered to be apophatic because of their connections and arguments with the existence of the after-life and of God, or provide discussion on divine themes. Without connections to others, we would all be living lives of robots, and Bensmaïa is making a subtle argument here for the debate on transcendence. For if exile is an escape from somewhere, then post-humanism could also be described as transcending the needs of the body, or at the very least, bringing up the topic for debate – we ourselves, in the narrative, embody passage.

Passage can of course also refer to a passage of time. The year in the book’s title implies one year’s duration, but this idea is immediately combated by Bensmaïa through the instructive beginning of both parts one and two. Each of them recount various geographical places that the narrative will possibly occur in – or those events that have ‘already occurred’. Yet the year is not one, but multiple. The actions described in the book occur for two years in Algiers, seven years in Aix-en-Provence, one year in Switzerland, seven years in France, Algiers, the States, England...and “at all times” in the city of Paris, to quote the beginning of part one. Here we can note an instance of an implosive passage of the always already prophesied time. The contrast is set out below between the beginnings of parts one and two:

(1962-64, Algiers, 1964-71, Aix-en-Provence, August 1968 Switzerland [the Lenk Valley] 1971-88, Aix-en-Provence, Algiers, San Francisco, London, Minneapolis, Lyons, Minneapolis, Paris *at all times*) (p 2).

⁹⁹ Bensmaïa has written extensively about the marginalised state of Algerian literature. Similarly, Qader writes, “Francophone African literature remains on the margin of literary studies.” Quoted in Nasrin Qader, *Narratives of Catastrophe: Boris Diop, ben Jeloown, Khatibi*. New York: Fordham University Press, 2009, p 1.

(1992-*the present*, Minneapolis, *fall 1992*, Providence [Swan Cemetery], *June 1988*, Paris [Père-Lachaise Cemetery], *April 1963*, Oran; *summer 1989*, London, Algiers, *at all times*) (p 68).

This technique elongates our sense of time passing, or passages of time, if you will. Because the passages of time are given the name of an area, city or cemetery, the reader immediately imagines the author as taking down these very words that we are about to read in many different geographic locations and over periods of thirty or so years. The time created by this sort of treatment of ‘passage of time’ is that it prolongs time, in the sense that many sojournings around the place imply a certain freedom of movement but most importantly, eternity. So when the narrator writes “Paris” or “Algeria” “*at all times*” he is implying that his self resides in these places, and always will.

In his non-fiction work *Experimental Nations, or The Invention of the Maghreb*, Bensmaïa states, “this is the heart of the matter: To write, to think in a foreign language ‘like thieves’, to use the dominant language in the most outrageous ways, to make the most daring transformations.”¹⁰⁰ Furthermore, Bensmaïa also summarises the difficulties facing Algerians and Algeria in *becoming* relevant to itself, and proud of its national identity through literary production as “the aftereffects of colonialism, the loss of a culture, the lack of human and material means, regional specificity, multiple ethnic groups.”¹⁰¹

I mentioned earlier that Bensmaïa is a writer who is concerned with problems of texts communicating to a wide-enough audience when most of the population of Algeria at the time of writing *The Year of Passages* were in fact, in Berber or French. In *Experimental Nations, or The Invention of the Maghreb*, he writes, “[i]n the countries of the Maghreb there are Moroccans, Algerian and Tunisians, but there are also Arabs, Berbers, Touaregs, and

¹⁰⁰ Bensmaïa, *Experimental Nations or The Invention of the Maghreb*. New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2003, p 26.

¹⁰¹ *ibid.*

Mozabites.”¹⁰² From the first page of this critical meditation, it is clear that the book is also absorbed with ideas of passage. Speaking of work by Algerian writer Djébar, Bensmaïa enters into now-familiar litany of additive lists: “*La Nouba* functions...as a...’geo-thetic’ survey of *feminine places*, not only in the geographical sense but also in the rhetorical sense of *commonplaces*: home, hearth, bedroom, window, but also speech, memory, song, scream.”¹⁰³

In *The Year of Passages*, Bensmaïa’s author-narrator also speaks ironically of “first-class space, young space, expressive space, French space, the space of dreams, minority space, gaylesbo space, protected space, money space, Muslim space, space à la mode de Caen, Maghrebian space, Beur space, Khorote space, pleasure-dome space!” (p 87). The plethora of *khora* is at work here in this narrative. In this way, apophatic excess is represented in fiction.

Far from being at ease in the space, which may also be said to be an apophatic stance, there is a strong sense that the author-narrator is trapped, both figuratively (in Minneapolis) and literally (within the text): “I’ve got to bury Sadeg Hedayet and get assholified, bury him as I get assholified in Minneapolis” (p. 87), and “even if I play, I’m still out of bounds, so I play all the same, but I’m out of bounds all the same, I play all the same, I’m in bounds, I’m in the shit, because there’s no out of bounds, *no exit!*” (p. 116). One is both permanently in passage and permanently entrapped.

It has already been established that ecstatic and apophatic literature can be identified through its utilisation and understanding of such concepts as *apostrophein*, *aposiopesis*, ‘ontological fluidity’ and ‘designed waste’ as well as ‘economies of reserve’. These are all techniques described as being used by Riding. Bensmaïa’s *The Year of Passages* also has

¹⁰² *ibid.*, p 93.

¹⁰³ *ibid.*, p 67. “Hence, what is attained is “a new *chronotype*: that of feminine time (s).” (p 68).

recourse to these techniques and thematic preoccupations; it is a work that explores apophatic writing within the bounds of such treatments of temporality as the 'always already' in an hysterically structured narrative in order to establish a sense that this is a kind of apocalyptic literature that is placed before the reader.

References to cyber-theory and post-humanism abound in the unusual characterisation of Macha the 'wife machine' and in this way the Deleuzian BwO is imaginatively realised. The refusal of the face is a kind of *apostrophein* device, and is an example of the kind of multiple obfuscations and revealings to do with the author-narrator, his 'inner' self and his desire to remain 'un-seen'. Where Riding uses a quaint, formal kind of humourous tone throughout her works, Bensmaïa utilises a characteristic kind of delirious and hysterical syntax, peppered freely with exclamation marks and a never-ending stream of outraged sensibilities. Combining ecstatic themes such as a striving for silence amongst cacophony and cacophony amidst forbidden languages, alongside an extraordinary compulsion to exile oneself, Bensmaïa's frenetic humour conveys the capacity of the ecstatic to evade realist fictive and genre dictates in order to represent creatively an ecstatic narrative.

Conclusion: Signs of the Ecstatic

Ecstatic literature has many potential presents and futurities, yet amidst its potentialities it can be recognized by a number of distinct characteristics. First amongst these is a knowledge of what Georges Bataille called “inner experience”, translated – in terms of the focus of this thesis – into narrative representation. The term inner experience indicates that the reader can anticipate a highly subjective, inner-human, quality to ecstatic writing.

Ecstatic writing is similar to mystical writing in its apophatic focus. Where ecstatic writing differs is in the treatment of the idea of God, whether named or unnamed. Riding displays an ironic attitude toward the existence of God in her prose collection, *Progress of Stories*. In Bensmaïa’s *The Year of Passages*, God is excluded from the narrative apart from references to established theistic religions, with a regionally expected focus on Islam. Different writers and thinkers have made their contributions toward defining ecstasy and ecstatic temporality. Georges Bataille examined spirituality *sans* God, Jacques Derrida and David Farrell

Krell philosophically investigate notions of ecstatic temporality and how ‘the always already’ comes to bear down on existence. The always already, filled as it is with foreboding, dread and inevitability, is an example of ecstatic temporality. The *deja là* haunts the perimeters of the text. For the crisis is always already happening, somewhere, at some time. And the catastrophe has already happened.

As we have seen, the writers Laura Riding and Réda Bensmaïa are completely different in their narrative style and structure. However, they share common areas of interest that peak in their ecstatic fictive characteristics. What does an ecstatic author look like? For the face of the ecstatic author is not shown to me to describe, although the short stories of

this thesis reveal me as among those transacted by ecstatic temporalities, characters, places, and themes. I know that ecstatic writers approach writing from an apophatic viewpoint. I know that they will attempt to enact narratives of invisibility, of exile and escape, narratives of ontological instability. I know that there will be elements of a feeling of eschatology and that a certain kind of dread accompanies the ecstatic, opening the way for expressions of subversive acts such as meditating on *lingchi* (torture) and representing those experiences in narrative.

Laura Riding applies apophatic themes to literature in her treatment of silence, the interior, and ontological fluidity. The transformative power of the belly of the Story-pig object in “The Story-Pig” makes the belly a *khora* that is a site of invisibility and alterations. It has been demonstrated that she develops two specific techniques in *Progress of Stories*: *aposiopesis* and *apostrephein*, in order to show how literature can tell unsayable things. Riding’s ecstatic treatment of temporality is identified through the use of what I have referred to as the “everlasting present tense”, a version of the always already which shows events as inevitable and eternal. Riding’s “The Story-Pig” is governed by *aposiopesis* or ‘coming to a sudden halt’, the refusal to continue to narrate. For to talk means to tell some version of the truth, and Riding reminds her reader that they are not necessarily worthy of her speech. Like Bensmaïa, Riding refuses to describe faces in her fiction, and the face is the most humanising aspect of the person, as Deleuze and Guattari as well as Derrida have explored in their explorations of the dismantling of the describable face.

Riding utilises a method of what I have called additive simultaneity in order to shortcircuit the work and create a multiplicity of time and places. *Khora* is the term used first by Plato to describe a ‘no-place place’ and is also an ecstatic characteristic, being set far apart from the traditional fictional settings that can be termed realist literature. In the current climate of extreme tension relating to notions of racial identity, *khora* settings offer a refuge

from patriotic bias. Certainly the Hotel Moon could be anywhere and so too could Port Huntlady. Often ecstatic ground beneath the feet lacks a nationality.

Réda Bensmaïa in *The Year of Passages* is also ecstatic author, because of his *modus loquendi*, his themes of entrapment and excess as well as his treatment of ecstatic temporality, the always already. The book has already been written, the crime has already been committed, that which is alive is dying or surrounded by symbols and spaces of death. Bensmaïa, through his explorations of deadlands, presents the reader with a narrator who soliloquises in cemeteries, a most significant kind of *khora*. Like Riding, Bensmaïa refuses the face of the narrator to the reader to offset the agony of being seen by others. Bensmaïa's apophatic approach to narrative representation includes the Deleuzian "Body without Organs" characterisation of Macha, the not-human wife of the narrator. The characterisation of Macha also provokes thought in the context of post-humanist notions of "connection" and "system overload/shut-down" – where machines take over important functions and control our conduct. His dark humour has been described as a kind of delirium, a laughter of despair that is really focussed on finding the truth to existence. Full of the laughter of despair, Bensmaïa is representative of a particular strand of ecstatic thought that I have referred to as the ecstatic of cruelty (exemplified by Bataille, Rimbaud and Céline, among others). In a world devoid of rational meaning, Bensmaïa's narrator must continue, he must live until he dies; this resignation infiltrates every part of his life, he is beyond rectifying, changing, developing.

In a post-colonial reading of ecstatic literature, it has been demonstrated how important notions of race, of nation and of belonging are to the narrator in *The Year of Passages*. Bensmaïa's narrator is ready to renounce everything, and his Algerian nationality is willingly relinquished. Ecstatic writing is necessarily concerned with ideas around exile and although Bensmaïa's narrator exiles himself from Algeria in the text, he is also himself

exiled by the authorities in the narrative because of the writing of the work *Dead Letters*.

Ecstatic writing often engages in economies of multiplicity, loss, containment and zero.

Bensmaïa's narrator is de-territorialised in all senses of the word: as a man, as an Algerian, and as an artist.

In my creative portfolio, *Oneirium*, I have tried to present narratives to the reader that may also be called ecstatic. Many of my stories are apophatic in their approach and narrative style. "Catharine in Thirds" was created from an experience of simultaneous conversations between myself and an unknown authority figure determined to refuse me. Matteo and Anne-Colette are characters who communicate without speaking in "The Serving Woman"¹⁰⁴ and their not-speaking-aloud is reflected in the historical context of the contemporaneous story of Joan of Arc, who "heard voices". The narrator of "These Tawdry Ceremonies" says very little but perceives much, and is suffering from some kind of existential malaise. "Judea 33 A.D." is a story that explores apophatic experience in its depiction of the journeyings between God and Jesus and in the meeting between Satan and Jesus (also known as the third temptation of Christ; see the Book of Matthew). It is a narrative that is principally concerned with representing the always already while avoiding overt religious references, which often in our modern time appear somewhat melodramatic and naïve when taken out of context. "The god Khonsu marked the passages of time" is based around the idea of exile and escape in its exploration of space travel¹⁰⁵. Its anti-capitalist protagonist is ultimately ignored by the

¹⁰⁴ Jacques Derrida, in "How to Avoid Speaking" notes, "at the moment when the question 'How to avoid speaking?' arises, it is already too late. There was no longer any question of not speaking. Language has started without us, in us and before us. This is what theology calls God, and it is necessary, it will have been necessary, to speak. This "it is necessary" (*il faut*) is *both* the trace of undeniable necessity...*and* of a past injunction. Always already past, hence without a past present. Indeed, it must have been possible to speak in order to allow the question 'How to avoid speaking?' to arise. Having come from the past, language before language, a past that was never present and yet remains unforgettable..." Quoted in Budick and Iser (eds.) *Languages of the Unsayable. op. cit.*, pp. 29-30.

¹⁰⁵ Currently there are opportunities to experience the strange and compelling view of the earth from space through the efforts of entrepreneurs such as Sir Richard Branson and companies like Astrobotic©.

mysterious child who appears to see all in the story, illustrating the ecstatic work's ability to avoid convenient or glib conclusions. The story "Pupuri to Taonga!" or "Don't Let Them Take Your Treasure!" builds on ideas of post-colonial protest. It presents a fictional historical occurrence (the Ball-room Dancing Plague¹⁰⁶) which offers an opportunity for the "authorities" to banish (and effectively decimate) the Māori to an undisclosed *khora* in the South Pacific ocean. "Sweet Nicky" was born from outrage toward men who engage in violent acts against women. I hoped to present the reader with a kaleidoscopic vision of the scene in the woods that is painfully delayed by the anguished and helpless narrator.

Bataille has investigated a 'mysticism of economics'. He does this by means of envisioning economies at work in literature. By way of analogy, when the human being is born, it is provided for until a certain age; when the human being reaches adulthood it must necessarily attain and consume units of energy (for example, food) for its own survival. Ecstatic writing is able to engage with ideas around consumption and expenditure because it itself is abstemious and yet overwhelmingly generous. A post-humanist reading of ecstatic writing offers an alternative to the capitalist ideologies of competitiveness, acquisition and luxury¹⁰⁷. Bataille's *La Part Maudite* (*The Accursed Share*, 1949) equates luxury with profligacy, observing, "[t]he industrial development of the entire world demands of Americans that they lucidly grasp the necessity, for an economy such as theirs, of having a margin of profitless operations".¹⁰⁸ In the current climate where the gap between rich and poor becomes even wider, the quest to find new solutions for living, such as the implementation of systems of sustainable agriculture, continues. Ecstatic writing offers an

¹⁰⁶ I conceived of the 'Ball-room Dancing Plague' as being an event that occurred inexplicably, when certain individuals were no longer affected by the laws of gravity. This particular kind of 'plague' has significance in debates around post-colonialism as ball-room dancing is an activity typically favoured by European aristocrats

¹⁰⁷ The opposite notion to 'luxury' is 'sacrifice'. The ultimate in sacrificial acts is of course the story of Jesus Christ.

¹⁰⁸ Georges Bataille, *The Accursed Share. Vol. 1: Consumption*. Robert Hurley (tr.). New York: Zone Books, 1991, pp. 25-6.

exit out of normative anthropomorphised reality and provides a platform for writers to explore post-humanist narrative representation. Riding's "The Story-Pig" utilises ontological fluidity as well as talking objects that imitate their owners. "Miss Banquett, or the Populating of Cosmania" and "A Last Lesson in Geography" from *Progress of Stories* deals in economies of multiplication. In "A Last Lesson in Geography", 'the First One' or 'first human' is called Tooth, abstracting the human into a zone of effective nullification.

Over the course of this study I reached several plateaus that I mistook for impasses. The first of these was that apophatic literature can be talked about without entering into pedagogical hypocrisies.¹⁰⁹ The second was that current medical research has identified a worship-part of the brain.¹¹⁰ If there is evidence to suggest that neural functioning can explain religious experience (primarily based on activity within the prefrontal cortex in association with the anterior temporal lobe, reward circuit, and limbic regions), then the question of whether or not that disqualifies notions of experiencing transcendence can only be answered by the individual.

Ecstatic writing can venture not only into uncharted territories of narrating the unspeakable or realms of invisibility; it can also provide lines of flight from a humanist reading of a text. The ecstatic work, shy as it is, can be identified by the reader familiar with apophatic themes and discourse. Ecstatic writing is not restricted to an epoch. It is not a style that is acquired in order to be fashionable and popular. Ecstatic writing is unparalleled in

¹⁰⁹ Bataille observes, "It is easy to say that one cannot speak of ecstasy....the difficulty, however is that being less commonly experienced than laughter or things, what I say of it cannot be familiar, easily recognisable" (*Inner Experience*, p. 123).

¹¹⁰ Irene Cristofori and Jordan Grafman, "Neural Underpinnings of the Human Belief System". Quoted in H.F. Angel, L. Oviedo, R. Paloutzian, A. Runehov, R. Seitz (eds.). *Processes of Believing: The Acquisition, Maintenance, and Change in Creditions. New Approaches to the Scientific Study of Religion*, Vol 1., Springer, Cham, 2017, pp. 111-123.

realising fictively resistant and politically irrepressible potentialities of narrative and imagination.

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