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Ruth Miller and the poetics of literary maternity

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As I sd to my
friend, because I am
always talking – John, I

sd, which was not his
name, the darkness sur
rounds us, what

can we do against
it, or else, shall we &
why not buy a goddam big car,

drive, he sd, for
christ's sake, look
out where yr going.

Robert Creeley, "I Know a Man"

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To Fionah, for the time...

Abstract

Ruth Miller's poetry was written between 1940 and the year of her death in 1969, and is published in three volumes, *Floating Island* (1965), *Selected Poems* (1968), and *Ruth Miller: Poems Prose Plays* (1990). In this thesis, I modify the concept of literary maternity suggested by Joan Metelerkamp in her article, "Ruth Miller: Father's Law or Mother's Lore?" (1992). My approach is informed by a model of literary maternity that is not defined in terms of a female figure but in terms of a relation between the earliest parent and the child, or what is referred to in psychoanalytic terms as the preoedipal relation. My thesis is concerned to show how Miller's poetry and a theory on the maternal function of literature reinterpret each other; it includes a consideration of Miller's literary legacy, the critical literature describing her *oeuvre*, and the issues of continuity and authority that arise in the context of literary publication. To this end, I draw on the unpublished correspondence collected in the Miller archive at the English Literary Museum in Grahamstown, with particular reference to a series of letters exchanged between Lionel Abrahams, Miller's literary executor, and Miller's daughter, Pat Campbell, between 1985 and 1994 surrounding the publication of Miller's collected work. The theoretical orientation of the thesis is psychoanalytic and post-structuralist, placing special emphasis on the work of Melanie Klein (1882–1960), a Viennese-born psychoanalyst who established the school of object relations in London after the Second World War and developed the technique of play therapy. Klein's interest in the mother-child relation, her matricentric but non-idyllic version of psychic development, is traced through readings of her work offered by Julia Kristeva and Jacqueline Rose, and is explored with reference to Miller's poetry.

Table of Contents

Abstract.....	iv
Table of Contents.....	v
Preface	vi
Introduction.....	1
Chapter One	33
Chapter Two	71
Chapter Three.....	112
Chapter Four.....	145
Bibliography	178

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Preface

"[...] readers, knocking on the hard case of metaphor, plead / let us in let us in" (Joan Metelerkamp, "Ruth Miller" *Towing the Line* 120–121)

"Read me, hold me, but don't crush me, don't get too close. Above all, don't think you know, and I would want to add, don't expect to get it right" (Jacqueline Rose, *On Not Being Able to Sleep* 164)

"Come not unto me, let me go in peace / For no-one and nothing now can rescue me" (Ruth Miller "Come Not Unto Me" in *Ruth Miller* 39)

My intention in writing this thesis is to revisit the issue of Ruth Miller's literary maternity in the context of the literary criticism describing her *oeuvre* in order to explore the implications it could have for the survival of her legacy and the reader's willingness "to open up the [Miller] corpus, to transform it, to recognize its interminability" (Rose, *Why War?* 27). I propose to do this by situating Miller's maternity in the mobile relations that materialise in readings of her text rather than in a continuous authorial voice (called "Miller") constituted, or substantiated, for use by emerging poets, particularly emerging women poets, at a particular historical moment. It is my suggestion that the way to think, and to continue thinking about the Miller corpus, the way to ensure that her work continues to be read and reread, is for the reader to negate, provisionally, any filial connection with Miller. My expectation is that this approach will open up Miller's *oeuvre* (including the critical literature describing it), as well as the topic of literary maternity, to more interpretation and to the testing of new connections.

In an attempt to ensure the survival of Miller's literary legacy and to assist her literary heirs in their ongoing search for authority, legitimacy, and guidance, revisionary readings of Miller's work have asserted the need for her would-be daughter-poets in particular to establish connections with her. In the course of my thesis I will show that a similar move to establish connections with Miller (or an

authorial voice called “Miller”) in critical readings of her work, before rehearsing some sort of separation from her text, fails on at least two counts. Firstly, in their eagerness to connect with Miller, readings of this nature inevitably insist on the continuity of the writing voices or selves that speak across her text (most particularly her poetry and personal correspondence) resulting in the shutting down of other potential connections; secondly, while such readings might recognise their role in constructing the authorial voice they then go on to analyse, there is little initiative on their part to consider the effects that this involvement might have on the reader’s putative externality to, or non-implication in, the text thus created. As a result, the reader might be self-conscious about her ability to conjure the writer’s voice, but she remains unable to credit the text’s ability to prefigure *her*.

The provisional negation of any filial connection with Miller’s work will be accomplished through a conscious staging and restaging of a series of ambivalent separations in my close readings of the critical literature describing her poetry as well as of a selection of her poems that undoes the fixity of the positions reader-daughter, poet-mother inside the text. The motility and seeming intransitivity of these “separations” will be shown to recall descriptions of preoedipal object relations, their oscillation between “seeking, finding, obtaining, possessing with satisfaction” and “losing, lacking, missing, with fear and distress” (Joan Rivière qtd. in Rose, *Why War?* 151). By acknowledging the imaginary status of complete separation or total independence, my reading also acknowledges that the separation of Miller’s corpus into poems or creative writing and biographical material is more strategic than real and that the relation between the writing and what gets called “the life” is not easily calibrated. While I will not attempt to recreate, conscientiously, solicitously, the circumstances of Miller’s life, intuit her intentions from a close study of available

socio-biographical material, or adhere to her reputed literary “standards and attitudes,” (Abrahams, *Miller* 9) I will engage with the way biographical or socio-historical information can be used to “suggestively enrich” (Attridge 104) readings of her poetry and her literary maternity. It is, after all, one thing to recognise that there is no getting at Miller, that there is no “knowable” Miller outside what she wrote and what has been written for or about her, and quite another to know what to do with this insight in a reading of her poetry. The temptation is always there to use any available biographical detail on a writer (which in Miller’s case is tantalisingly sparse) in the service of a desire to present the definitive reading of that writer’s corpus – a desire that, as will be shown in Chapter Two, always involves the confusion of bodies with texts and that is particularly acute in the case of those people who enjoyed a close relationship with the writer in real life. In the case of the reader who lays claim to a special relation with Miller through the experience of reading her, a literary daughter, what the celebration of that encounter as a spontaneous moment of identification in a longer narrative of “self-emergence” (Rose, *Haunting* 4) excludes is, precisely, the text. In my thesis I affirm the right of the reader to interpret Miller’s text, including her biography, in ways that Miller might have consciously refused, or could not have foreseen in her lifetime.

The subjunctive mood of the reading strategy I deploy is succinctly expressed in the ambiguous closing line of Sylvia Plath’s poem “Medusa”: “there is nothing between us” (*Ariel* 45–46). The ambiguity of the poem’s concluding line (what Janet Malcolm registers as its “chilling double meaning” (*The Silent Woman* 35)) lies in its simultaneous acknowledgement and denial (or acknowledgement through denial) of the intimate relation between, in this case, a daughter and her mother. In the first, most immediate reading of the line, nothing is understood as shorthand for “not one

thing” (nothing is everything negated, and mother and daughter are at odds and radically discontinuous). Another interpretation of the line might read “nothing” as objectively immaterial (nothing is not anything and mother and daughter are seamlessly unified). The double meaning of the line could be read as an effect or accident of proximity in which the intolerable closeness of a mother-daughter relation figures as a resistance to meaning at the level of the signifier. The structure of the line that appears to close the poem is itself “too close” (too dense, too like something else) to admit authoritative interpretation: “[t]he same grammatical pattern [‘there is nothing between us’] engenders two meanings that are mutually exclusive” (de Man qtd. in Barbara Johnson, *World* 39).

The ambiguity of Plath’s line brings us face to face with our inability, and possible disinclination, to decide the status of “nothing” in language: any reference to immateriality, “nothing” that does not matter, involves a naturalisation of “what matters” that is constituted by that which it excludes as “nothing.” A statement on what matters, however innocuous, is always more performative than cognitive, a case of what matters (“the thing is”) treating that which it excludes as a condition of its identity as demonstrably immaterial or nothing. To suggest that nothing *matters* is to begin to sense what might be at stake in Plath’s densely constructed closing line: the formative role that negation plays in the subject’s ability to use symbols and to think, especially (it could be argued), when it comes to thinking about mothers.

Jacqueline Rose comments on Freud’s use of the example of denial of the mother in his paper on “Negation” “to usher in the discussion of the origins of thought” (“You ask who this person in the dream can be. It’s *not* my mother.” We emend this to: “So it is his mother”) as well as on his grounding of the capacity *for* denial “in that primordial connection to her [the mother’s] body” without which “there

would be no such thing as thought” (*Sleep* 150–151). Even more interesting for my purposes, founder of the school of object relations in England, metaphorical child of Freud and potential “‘mother’ of a new second-generation psychoanalysis” (Rose, *Why War?* 141), Melanie Klein insists that separation from the mother is a necessary precondition for the psychic freedom of the subject and for the emergence of her symbolic capacity. The “uncertain miracle [of symbolisation]” depends on the mother, “as long as ‘I’ [the child] can get beyond her” (Kristeva, *Klein* 135). Klein’s version of symbolisation as an achievement that is won both *with* the mother and, in a certain sense, *against* her recasts the mother’s failure to be everything for the child (to embody the maternal ideal) as the creation of an opportunity for interpretation to begin, to let a creative reading take place or, more simply, to give such a reading a chance.

My approach also indicates a letting go of preconceptions regarding the kind of textual relations that might be mobilised in the course of reading Miller’s work as a maternal text. It replaces the narrow expectation or prescription that Miller’s writing or aesthetic practice should reflect and be measured against conventional maternal impulses (guidance, comfort and sustenance), with a new openness and responsiveness to the work’s ambivalence, shifting identifications and what Joan Metelkamp calls its “lack of “positive” vision” (McGrane). To put it another way, while the relations mobilised in readings of Miller’s text might not be nurturing in any conventionally maternal way, I argue that it might well be the case that the failure of the relations to meet the conventional expectations of maternity is enabling in ways that deserves closer attention and that indicates a different itinerary for readings of a maternal function in critical literature going forward.

My reading of Miller's work and its criticism has led me to believe that those aspects of her text that have been identified as somehow unsatisfactory by critics seeking a connection with her (most particularly, its "lack of positive vision") are best viewed not as some avoidable downside to her writing requiring extra-literary justification, but as its element, fundamental to her poetic practice and one source of the ambivalent appeal of her poetry for outwardly diverse readers. To this end, my thesis represents an invitation to future readers to write their way after Miller's text (not to let it go) even to the point at which they are brought into contact with the outer limits of what a maternal literature can be or look like and still expect to carry on. In this way, aspects of Miller's text that have been sidelined or treated as regrettable by readers looking to ensure the continuity of her legacy can be viewed otherwise: as being material to her art and a necessary part of the dialectics of creativity (its comings and goings, or binding and unbinding) in all acts of representation.

My thesis starts from the assumption that Miller is a literary mother (but qualifies the use of the term in relation to literary criticism) to ensure that the connection to her text that it sets about negating, provisionally, through readings of her work, is meaningful and conducive to the freeing up of thought (in Freudian terms, the lifting of repression) around Miller's work and the discourse on literary maternity. This assumption also retains the Kleinian emphasis that I remarked on earlier, namely, that separation from the mother is an achievement (never complete) that the child wins both *with* and *against* the mother. By pointing to the mother's implication in the recurring event called separation, this assumption also underwrites the event's ambivalence.

The strategic negation of any connection to Miller's text as the work of a literary mother (whose legacy the critic wants to continue without looking to identify

with the poet herself) is also meant to act against the reader's easy assumption of complacent familiarity with the text or the tendency to generalise from subjective experience evident in some feminist-oriented criticism. (I am thinking in particular of the habit among aspirant literary daughters of speaking only of themselves and their own needs every time they try to "find" or connect with the literary mother.) By forcing the reader to profess ignorance of the authorial voice to which she also gives substance, this strategy presents her with the limits of her own knowledge in relation to the interminable literariness of the text. The gentle rebuke of "don't think you know" interrupts the reader's drifting into narcissistic identification with the authorial voice – "Child in the long grass [...] / Thinks that the wind spoke, for her private bliss" (Miller, "Telephone Wires" in *Ruth Miller* 66) – by pointing up the text's endless suggestibility to alteration and its shifting of boundaries in different readings.

Returning for a moment to the vertiginous line that has informed my approach to the issue of Miller's literary maternity in literary criticism (Plath's "There is nothing between us"), it seems worth asking what my earlier discussion of the mutually exclusive interpretations of the word "nothing" might have missed. For if, in another reading, nothing becomes a no-thing, we are confronted with the trace of an abject and primitive object relation that haunts the borders of language and threatens the absolute alternatives of fusion with, or complete separation from, the body of the mother with disruption. The appearance of this "no-thing" ("Not me. Not that. But not nothing, either. A "something" that I do not recognize as a thing" (Kristeva, *Powers* 2)) in a reading of Miller's literary maternity and the topic of legacy transmission commemorates the forced, never complete passage of matter into words and the irreducible ambivalence over separation from the mother (the mother's and the child's) that is at the heart of representation and the source of its renewal.

This no-thing that is better than nothing (the provisional negation of something that the emerging subject cannot leave behind nor identify with entirely) makes possible the reader's productive misrecognition of her implication in the text that materialises in the course of her reading as her location outside it – a misrecognition that keeps the reader going, “knocking on the hard case of metaphor” (Metelkamp, “Ruth Miller” *Towing the Line* 120–121), and from acknowledging, finally, that she is inside what she thought she wanted all along. No-thing, then, as the saving grace of mothers and daughters, the “long, long knowledge” (Miller, “The Glove Box” 38) they receive as a gift from the other that is without definite origin or end. “And no way now to know what happened then – / none at all – unless of course you improvise” (Eavan Boland, “The Black Lace Fan My Mother Gave Me” in *Object Lessons* 231–232).

Improvise, read Miller differently, let Miller go... Where? On.

Introduction

Ruth Miller's work was written between 1940 and the year of her death in 1969. She published two volumes of poetry during her lifetime (*Floating Island* 1965 and *Selected Poems* 1968) and her collected work appeared posthumously under the title *Ruth Miller: Poems Prose Plays* (1990). She is, relatively speaking, a well-known poet in South African literary circles. A series of letters exchanged between Lionel Abrahams, Miller's literary executor, and Pat Campbell, Miller's daughter, in the late eighties over the proposed publication of a volume of Miller's collected work attests to the consistent exposure enjoyed by Miller's writing in South African academic publications, at least at that time.

In a letter dated 16 August, 1989, Abrahams comments: "Every few months there is a request from another anthologist, and people have written theses, and there are quite frequent references to Ruth Miller in literary articles." He continues:

SA literature gets far more attention than it used to in the 60's, though a preoccupation with radical revolutionary (and feminist) politics in many academics and writers gives that attention some bizarre twists – your mother would have been driven wild by some of the things that get said [...].

The projections of Miller's literary executor notwithstanding, my first encounter with her work was through a feminist-oriented South African anthology edited by Cecily Lockett and entitled *Breaking the Silence: A Century of South African Women's Poetry* (1990). Six of Miller's poems were reprinted in the book:

"Galatea";¹"Blue-mantled Mary"; "Voicebox"; "Submarine"; "Virginia Woolf" and "Spoon". I was in my final year of high school when I read the book and an aspirant

¹ The poem referred to here is one of two poems written by Miller with similar titles but published in different volumes of her work. The one I have been discussing appears in her *Selected Poems* and refers to the figure beloved by Pygmalion in the Hellenistic myth. The "Galatea" poem in *Floating Island* refers to the nymph Galatea "beloved by the monster Polyphemus" (Brewer's 476).

poet and feminist, and I can remember responding to “Galatea” especially with a sense of recognition and exhilaration. I felt, I think, like I had been found.

Glacial Galatea knows
Nothing unless she knows
She was herself before Pygmalion’s bold
Stare broke truth from her in a truth as cold.

Though brittle, breaks not.
Though eaten, wastes not.
Though thirsting, slakes not.
I was myself before you touched me. I.

My immediate response to this poem, and one that its inclusion in a feminist anthology anticipates to some extent, was to treat it as a critique of the inhibiting effects of gender identity on subjectivity. Although I could not have formulated it as such at the time, my reading might have argued that the poem was a dramatisation of that moment when the silent and silenced object of literary discourse (namely, the figure of the woman, realised *par excellence* in Pygmalion’s statue, Galatea) resists her historical condition and speaks out defiantly in the language that has also subjected her. Briefly, in support of this argument, I might have pointed out that the first stanza, written in the third person singular, and the “headless” predicates of the second stanza (“Though brittle, breaks not. / Though eaten, wastes not. / Though thirsting, slakes not”), telescope into that final, isolate “I”, underscoring its status as the ultimate subject and triumphant terminus (the last word) of the poem.

It is a valid and compelling interpretation, and a good place to start. It is also, however, an unsatisfactory place to stop. And the reason I say this is not simply to draw attention to the poem’s ambiguous register and tone, or the self-division of its speaker, although these are both points worth considering, but to deal with another of its more insistent and seemingly unproductive effects – one that I have sensed in

Miller's writing in general and worked hard to marginalise – its ambivalence. This ambivalence does not refer to my mixed reaction to the poem (i.e. that there are aspects of it that I love and aspects that I hate) or to my evaluation of the poem's uneven achievement (that it might be good and bad in parts). Neither of these uses of the word "ambivalence" is quite correct. What I am trying to get at specifically through my use of the word "ambivalence" is a relation; in this case, the relation between writer and reader that is materialised and managed in the poem such that the reader, in Irish poet Eavan Boland's expression, is "drawn in and unassimilated at the same time." I am trying (again in Boland's words) to trace "some strangeness of relation" that I intend to show "keeps happening" in Miller's text (93–4).

I suggested above that I might have felt as if I had been found when I first read Miller's poem "Galatea". This statement implies that, at the time, I might have felt that the poem facilitated or restored my self-possession; that I was myself, or more myself, after reading it. It also implies that I might have sensed that the speaker of the poem, in looking for me or, in more precise terms, addressing me, also reconstituted me, made possible my self-recognition. All of which makes my increasing inability and/or disinclination to identify purposefully with the speaker in the poem, as I originally conceived her, worth examining.

My difficulties could be attributed to a number of factors: my ongoing reservations with feminism as an aesthetic practice; my adoption of a more self-critical approach to such "natural" identifications (i.e. acknowledging that the drive to identify with an English lyric poet in South Africa might have been motivated by the fear of cultural dispossession in a transforming socio-political landscape); or, simply put, because I am no longer sure how to take Miller. And this question of how to take "Miller" (as the proper name of a body of work), with its peculiar connotations of

identity, possession and ingestion (or identity as possession and ingestion) is one I shall be addressing later.

My recollection of reading Miller's poem seems to follow, fairly closely, my original interpretation of its meaning. Put another way, the poem appears to be, in many respects, emblematic of a certain kind of reading experience. The suggestion that the poem might be an object lesson in the value of self-recognition or self-knowledge is given weight by the authoritative, oracular-sounding voice of the first stanza: "Glacial Galatea knows / Nothing unless she knows / She was herself before [...]." Despite the gravitas of this voice and the poem's reference to classical literature, the stanza is surprisingly easy to paraphrase in what, on closer inspection, are extremely accessible terms: the ice maiden is an idiot (glacial also refers to something slow moving) if she doesn't realise there was life before Pygmalion. Given that "[w]riting," in the words of Rose, "is a passage through all the disparate strata of high and low art" (*The Haunting of Sylvia Plath* 186) it is hardly remarkable that Miller's poem should accommodate a more popular gloss. What is noteworthy is how these two strata, or registers, combine in the figure of "Glacial Galatea", the ice maiden, suggesting that the relation between the poem's complex theme of self-identity and its potential caricature is a particularly intimate one.

This intimate relation or "connection between the complexity of any theme and its caricature" (Boland 205) has implications for the rest of the poem. How, for instance, does it affect our treatment of that oracular voice? Is it a voice of authority or a parody of authority? And how does the first stanza relate to the second? The increased indentation of the second stanza could suggest a narrowing of focus that culminates in that single "I" (eye) and refers us back suggestively to Pygmalion's reductive "bold stare". Notice also, that the first stanza concentrates on the issue of

what Galatea knows, her intellectual status (i.e. the “head” of the poem), while the second stanza, with its increased indentation (like an ideal feminine waist) and “headless” predicates, handles bodily matters and the objectifying effect of being “touched” (the subject “I” becoming the direct object “me”). If the increased indentation is meant also to signpost a change in speaker (i.e. Galatea’s quoted speech) the stanzas begin to resemble a dramatic dialogue, with Galatea’s strident assertion of identity in the last line (the subject pronoun “I”), turning into a suggestion of her consent (“Aye”) that recalls and resists the repeated end-word, “knows” (also “no’s”), in the first stanza, and the repetitive “not”, in the second.

It is worth considering also, how the first three lines of the second stanza (“Though brittle, breaks not. / Though eaten, wastes not. / Though thirsting, slakes not”) relate to the last line (“I was myself before you touched me. I”). Is the last line being offered as a critique that solves the riddling refrain leading up to it, or is it a continuation and/or aggravation of the refrain’s interpretive resistance? If we treat it as a critique (and confirm my original reading of the poem) then that final “I” stands in relation to the riddle as a truth to its lie i.e. Galatea’s true or complex self is commenting on its lifeless caricature. However, if we see that “I” as an extension of the riddle and its interpretive resistance, then we are forced to consider that Galatea’s defiant statement of self-identity (“I was myself before [...]”) is as programmatic and reductive as the riddle it is meant to critique. The suggestion here is that the poem is not pointing up the reductiveness (brittleness) of any one particular discourse (broadly speaking, patriarchy) but of any authoritative discourse seeking to fix identity by resorting to circular, peremptory reasoning (“She was herself”; “I was myself”) or by appealing to an ideal but vague past (“before”).

The difficulty with this reading, the reason it is hard to take, is that it brings with it the realisation that the addressee of the poem (its “you”, its Pygmalion even) might implicate the reader; the reader who is working hard, and possibly with good intentions, to solve the poem and save Galatea – from what? Knowing nothing, which, in the context of the poem, could mean knowing whatever has been relegated to the status of nothing (or in Julia Kristeva’s terms, “abjected”) in order to define what really matters. The final line of the poem (“I was myself before you touched me. I”) suggests what the specific contours of this “nothing” might be as well as the potential penalties to be incurred by a reading that does not recognise the seriousness of the injunction against “knowing nothing”. For, if we take that final line as a transparent assertion of self-identity, we are returned immediately to the poem’s opening line (that ideal “before”), where “Glacial Galatea knows”, and her true self and the boundaries between what matters and what doesn’t are powerfully and comfortingly reinstated. If, however, we treat that final line as a careful reiteration of the stanza before it, then we notice also that its use of the intimate word “touched” and repetition of the first person pronoun “I” carry with them the unmistakable traces of an ambivalence that cause the speaker to become unhinged, momentarily, in her consummate performance of self-identity.

The final line, in this reading, is no longer an assertive statement of self-possession but a poignant and tender reminder of the irreducible otherness of the self and its necessary constitution and difficult passage through discourses (like love) that enforce, also, its banishment. The solitary, unsupported “I”, then, is less a celebration of independence or the power of expression (the writer’s or the reader’s) than an inarticulate because barely articulable comment on the lifelong pain, the

specifically oedipal pain, of feeling left out or, knowing nothing (*A Dictionary of Kleinian Thought*, 64).

So what do I say now to that reader who felt like she had been found when first she read this poem? That her position is untenable? That it is more complex, certainly. She can still choose to be found by, and to identify with, a subject (that “I”) who is presumed to know and who, through her skill with words, is able to rehabilitate Galatea and, by implication, return Pygmalion’s bold stare. The success of this identification will depend, however, on the reader’s ability to reconcile the stark tone of the first stanza (“bold stare”, “broke truth from her”) with the more nuanced use of “touched” in the second one. Alternatively, if the reader wishes to identify with the addressee in the poem (its “you”, its Pygmalion) she will be forced to acknowledge, implicitly, her intentions to overpower the speaker/poet (break truth from Galatea) and will therefore risk classification as one of those readers, in the words of Miller’s executor, whose “bizarre” twisting of the text would have driven Miller “wild”. Again, the implications of breaking truth from Galatea and driving Miller wild are made more ambiguous and mitigated by the final line of the poem which suggests that the reader’s attentions, though apparently brutal, are also informed by her desire (and the writer’s) to make contact, to transact, and to be moved (“you touched me”).

My experience leads me to believe that the reader is not in a position, or might not want to be in a position, to reject either identification entirely; also, that the opposition of these identifications is more strategic than actual. The reading I have been offering now, therefore, is not meant as a corrective to my previous one but rather as an admission of its pervasive power. As I remarked earlier, I might not be able or inclined any longer to identify purposefully with the speaker of the poem (as I

originally conceived her) but what persists in my reading, with an irresistible force, is the sense I have of being drawn into the poem and left out at the same time; of wanting to intrude into the poem (“you touched me”) and, at the same time, announce my complete separation from, and non-implication in, it (“Glacial Galatea knows”). Like the speaker in the poem, but not always with her, I shuttle between identifications and registers, trying to locate myself or, more precisely, to find something with which to locate myself and, by extension, the boundaries of the text. The frustration and fascination that characterise my transactions with the poem do not speak, I don’t think, to the poem’s success or failure, but rather to its success in depicting failure: the failure of identity, even more acutely, the failure of language to secure identity.

The poem’s situation between the twin poles of knowing and not knowing directs the reader’s forward and backward motion, my repeated revival of the dialectic, go back/there’s no going back, and my desire to believe, against all odds (including my desire not to believe), that there is something outside the text (call it Ruth Miller) who might make up for the weakness of language and save Galatea. And the way to save Galatea, as far as I can tell, is to fix the meaning of the poem and to separate finally what matters in the text from what is disposable (nothing), even if that means making ambivalence its ultimate solution, with Galatea, now, in a position of complacent knowingness about her own not-knowingness. For, if we consider, as I suggested earlier, that knowing nothing is the unavoidable price of subjectivity and, by extension, symbolic capacity, to save Galatea means nothing less than to save her from being, and to return her to the immaculate stillness of stone. Again, it is not my intention to set myself apart from the impulse to save Galatea and solve the poem, but offering ambivalence as the solution of the poem

makes this ambivalence largely the writer's problem; it also fails to take account of the text, which is itself a product of the ambivalent relations it structures and sustains. The challenge for me remains how to take account of that ambivalent textual relation and its inter-implication of writer and reader, speaker and addressee (such that their complete separation is refused) without also making ambivalence the catch-all meaning of Miller's text. In other words, how do I succeed in treating ambivalence as the mode of textual engagement indicated in my reading of Miller's poetry and which critical vocabulary do I use?

The last part of the above question might seem disingenuous considering my specific reference and frequent allusions to the work of Julia Kristeva in the passages above. I have found Kristeva's work hugely instructive for my analysis and preservation of textual ambivalence in Miller's work as a form of provisional separation from Miller as literary mother, but it was not through Kristeva initially that I began to think of my reading in relation to Miller's literary maternity. In many respects, the connection between Miller's work and an idea of literary maternity is glaringly obvious, especially considering my self-consciousness as an aspirant poet, at that time, and Miller's relative prominence as a woman poet in South African literature. Despite this obviousness, I only began seriously to consider the critical implications of literary maternity in relation to Miller, and my response to her, after reading an article by South African poet² and editor of the poetry journal, *New Coin*, from 2000 to 2004 (and for one edition in 2008), Joan Metelerkamp. In her article "Ruth Miller: Father's Law or Mother's Lore?" (1992) Metelerkamp argued that: "For

²Metelerkamp's published poetry titles to date are: *Towing the Line*, Carrefour, Cape Town, 1992; *Stone No More*, Gecko, Durban, 1995; *Into the Day Breaking*, Gecko, Durban, 2000; *Floating Islands*, Mokoro, Knysna, 2001; *Requiem*, Deep South, Grahamstown, 2003; *Carrying the Fire*, Substance Books, Cape Town, 2005; *Burnt Offering*, Modjaji Books, Cape Town, 2009. She was joint winner of the 1991 Sanlam Prize for Literature for *Towing the Line*.

a woman poet [...] it may be crucial to claim links with her literary predecessors in order to grapple with some of the contradictions which press upon her now. For our generation Ruth Miller is one such literary mother” (57).

In her analysis of Miller’s poetry Metelerkamp was intent on showing how Miller’s poetic voice was articulated with the ideology of her time and how the “contradictions of Miller’s social and literary context [...] all impinged on her poems” (Ruth Miller: Father’s Law or Mother’s Lore?” 57). She did not use the poetry to reinterpret her concept of literary maternity (which I will discuss at length in a later chapter), or consider her concept of literary maternity with reference to the administration of Miller’s literary legacy. Her approach appeared to be trying to situate Miller’s maternity in what Barbara Johnson has called “a feminine *persona*,” an approach Johnson contrasts, in her essay on the French poet, Stéphane Mallarmé (“Mallarmé as Mother”), with her own wish “to situate what is maternal in Mallarmé as a *function* or *structure*, defined not in terms of a female *figure* but in terms of a specific set of interactions and transactions that structure the relation between the earliest parent and the child” (*World* 137–138, her emphasis).

The difference between the two approaches can be schematised crudely according to their emphasis on the signifier or the signified of each poet’s writing. Johnson’s reading exemplifies Shoshana Felman’s challenge to conventional psychoanalytic critiques of literature through its redirection of critical attention to the signifier (language effects, the “unreadable” in any text) and its troubling of the border between theory and poetry. As Felman remarks:

there is no longer a clear-cut opposition or a well-defined border between literature and psychoanalysis: psychoanalysis could be intraliterary just as much as literature is intrapsychanalytic. The methodological stake is no longer that of the application of

psychoanalysis to literature, but rather, of their interimplication in each other. (“On Reading Poetry” 153, her emphasis)

Through her “interimplication” of Mahler’s text with Mallarmé’s text (including the critical literature surrounding it), Johnson rehearses a number of possible directions for a psychoanalytic reading of the mother as writer and for the topic of literary maternity in general. In addition, her choice of Mallarmé, a male poet, as mother serves to demonstrate dramatically the discursive emphasis of her work.

the fact that the maternal function is wielded by men – indeed, that literature is one of the ways in which men have elaborated the maternal position – means that the silence of actual women is all the more effectively enforced. With men playing all the parts, the drama appears less incomplete than it really is. (*World* 142)

My selection of the work of a woman poet to explore the implications of a maternal function in literature must be seen as a *limited* measure against such effacement.

Johnson’s essay on Mallarmé familiarised me with a critical vocabulary I had been moving towards, intuitively, and gave my reading a specifically psychoanalytic itinerary. I should specify that the kind of psychoanalytic reading that I propose to undertake has little in common with psycho-biography that finds in the act of offering a reading yet another opportunity to diagnose the psychological or temperamental infelicities of a given artist. This type of literary analysis fails on at least two counts: in terms of general reading practice, it ignores the text as a product of a process of reading that complicates any conception of the text as literary object and the critical machinery that surrounds it as capable of importing external knowledge into that text; secondly, it neglects the peculiar resources that a discourse especially attuned to the *effects* of language puts at the reader’s disposal. Such resources can return the reading being offered to a position of interimplication with the text under study, and redirect critical attention to questions of motivation and desire in the work of literary

criticism, in the administration of literary legacies and, more generally, in the history of literary criticism as an epistemological project.

With regard to the relation between the reader and the text, Felman points to the self-critical potential of psychoanalysis to “unseat the critic from any condescending, guaranteed, authoritative stance of truth” by recasting the question of art and its relationship to psychology in terms of its power over its readers:

the crux of this question is not so much in the interrogation of whether or not all artists are necessarily pathological, but of what it is that makes of *art* – not of the artist – an object of *desire* for the public; of what it is that makes for art’s *effect* [...] The question of what makes poetry lies, indeed, not so much in what it was that made [Edgar Allen] Poe write, but in what it is that *makes us read him* and that ceaselessly drives so many people to *write about him*. (“On Reading Poetry” 140–41, her emphasis)

Following Felman’s initiative, I will explore ways in which Miller’s text serves to reinterpret the topic of literary maternity, and I will look closely at the critical writing surrounding her work to ask questions about why we read Miller (instead of why she wrote), why she is so well-represented relative to other South African English-speaking women poets, and what it is that “drives so many people to *write about [her]*”.

In terms of a more specific orientation within psychoanalytic theory, the school of thought most obviously suited to a study of mother-child relations is that of Viennese-born psychoanalyst, Melanie Klein (1882–1960). As Greenberg and Mitchell write:

She [Klein] was a key figure in the shift in emphasis within the psychoanalytic literature to the study of the earliest relationship between the infant and the mother before the full development of the oedipal constellation in later childhood. (145)

In the context of a reading that trains its critical attention on mothers and daughters and questions of literary authority, Klein's psychoanalytic work is instructive first because of its "reorientation of the understanding of the child's inner world around its relation to its mother" (Appignanesi and Forrester, *Freud's Women* 454) and secondly because of its discursive slant: "For Klein, there is no 'real mother,' or she counts for very little, because the only mother who interests her is the mother who can be thought" (Kristeva, *Klein* 238). As Kristeva explains:

Freud oriented the psychic life of the subject around the castration ordeal and the function of the father; Melanie Klein, who did not ignore these realities, buttressed them with a maternal function that was missing from the founding father of psychoanalysis's theories. (12)

Klein's special interest in the "preoedipal"³ child recommends the adoption of a spatial rather than temporal model of the mother-daughter relation, which dovetails with my reading of the maternal relation in Miller's poetry as a textual "closeness" rather than a strictly historical affiliation. Unlike Freud, Klein is not interested in "pastness," her "contribution is to chart an area where present and past are one and time is spatial [measured by spatial object relationships: here, there; come, gone], not historical" (Mitchell 28). The idea of time as a spatial construct is informed by Freud's description of the *fort-da* game: "Watching his grandson playing in his pram

³ The use of the term "preoedipal" to describe Klein's interest in very young children is, strictly speaking, a Freudian usage. Klein differed from Freud on the question of when in the child's development the oedipal drama played itself out. "Where Freud saw the attachment to the mother as pre-Oedipal, the Kleinians, askance at such a departure from Freudian orthodoxy, declared themselves 'plus royaliste que le roi' as [Ernest] Jones put it. There is no such thing as a pre-Oedipal phase" (Appignanesi and Forrester, *Freud's Women* 443). In any event, Klein worked very little with strictly "preoedipal" children: "Her youngest patient was 2 ¾ years of age, and most of the children she uses as examples are considerably older, comfortably within the oedipal range as Freud had defined it. The presumption of oedipal impulses within the first two years, despite what Klein acknowledges is little overt indication of such impulses, derives mostly from the content of such fantasies in older children, particularly the predominance of oral themes [...] Klein was extrapolating back from the data of older children to their earlier years, much in the way Freud had used data from adults to determine infantile experiences in general" (Greenberg and Mitchell 123).

one day, Freud observed him throwing a toy out of the pram and exclaiming *fort!* (gone away), then hauling it in again on a string to the cry of *da!* (here)” (Eagleton, *Literary Theory* 185).

Freud’s interpretation of the infant’s loss and recovery of an object as his symbolic mastery of his mother’s absence indicates the relation between the fantasy of losing, or separating from the mother and the onset of symbolic capacity as well as the infant’s mapping of time through object relations. Together with her theory that psychic reality is constituted in and through the relation between objects, this spatial model of time picks up on the spatial aspects of reading. That is, it directs attention to the materiality of the signifier (how words, like objects in space, have meaning only in relation to each other) and away from the strictures of narrative time. In the body of my thesis, I show, through a reading of Miller’s poem “The Glove Box,” how the poem’s dramatisation of a moment of translation can be understood in spatial terms (and with reference to Klein’s interest in the symbolic mobility of objects) as the movement from one place to another through language.

The Kleinian definition of unconscious phantasy is situated primarily in the body and only gradually, if ever, assumes verbal form.

In Klein’s concept, phantasy emanates from within and imagines what is without, it offers an unconscious commentary on instinctual life and links feelings to objects and creates a new amalgam: the world of imagination. Through its ability to phantasize, the baby tests out, primitively ‘thinks’ about, its experiences of inside and outside. External reality can gradually affect and modify the crude hypotheses phantasy sets up. Phantasy is both the activity and its products. (Mitchell, *The Selected Melanie Klein* 23)

Klein's focus on the phantasised maternal body and the ever-renewable effort of interpretation the child undertakes in her anxious elaboration of symbolic relations based on primary transactions with this body, provides one analogy for the reader in her transactions with the text. Klein also theorises a series of positions, and their attendant defences, taken up by the infant (paranoid-schizoid and depressive positions) and derived from different modes of object relations (part-objects to whole objects) instead of a progression of stages (oral, anal, genital).

The availability of such positions throughout life argues for their implication in a range of interpretive activities (reading or writing), the attempt to locate meaning in a text (through the "splitting" of the text into interpretable and immaterial elements), and the mobility (introjection and projection) and ambivalence immanent in the structuring of such textual relations. In addition, Klein's work on persistent reparative impulses directed prototypically at the infant's phantasised attacks on the maternal body, chimes with the writer's complex relation to her own work, and the reader's concern to "do justice" to the text she is analysing (i.e. taking apart in order to re-articulate).

In the course of my research on Klein, it became clear to me that although she enjoys recognition as an influential thinker, she is not a popular theorist in the humanities in either psychoanalytic or feminist discourse. In her essay, "Negativity in the Work of Melanie Klein", Rose blames a post-Lacanian orthodoxy for blocking access to Klein by imputing "to her something of a psychic and sexual fix," namely: that her idea of the ego is too coherent, her concept of the instinct is reductive, and her account of sexuality is coercive (*Why War?* 139).

Rose places these critiques of Klein's account of psychological development alongside the rejection of Klein's "violence" and "negativity" by analytic circles in the

US, and by feminists in search of an idyllic maternal imaginary free of patriarchal, oedipal law *Why War?* 139). She asks: “Is there a way of linking the two criticisms – Klein as too safe and too dangerous, Klein as taking too much under, letting too much slip out of, control?” (*Why War?* 140) and uses this question as her entry point into Klein’s theory in order to suggest what it is about Klein’s text that might provoke such ambivalence (although she does not define it as such) in her readers.

The association Klein establishes between separation from the mother, or the more aggressive matricide,⁴ and the capacity for symbolisation and thought, informs her central preoccupation with the formative role of psychic negativity (which belongs to the death instinct) in the constitution of subjectivity. What is of particular interest to me in Rose’s re-reading of Klein, in addition to her suggestion of the ambivalence of her readers, is her discussion of the effect of the Kleinian concept of negativity not only on the content and formal structures of Kleinian theory, but on Klein’s status as “a child of Freud” and a potential “mother” of a new second-generation psychoanalysis (*Why War?* 141). In other words, Rose speculates that the emphasis of Klein’s theory on negative psychic development, her preoccupation with psychosis and death (maternal dependence and matricide),⁵ poses problems not only to the workings of any system of knowledge (including literary criticism), but for the transmission of her legacy in psychoanalytic and feminist discourse. Rose asks how

⁴ As Kristeva comments: “In fantasy life, of course, separation or loss is tantamount to *death*. Paradoxically [...] *the cult of the mother is, in Klein’s view, a pretext for matricide*” (Klein 130, her emphasis).

⁵ In his book-length reading of the trials of psychoanalytic affiliation and descent, *Dire Mastery*, François Roustang “traces what he sees as the psychotic fantasies underpinning the institution and its (patri)lineage, and locates these fantasies on more than one occasion in an unconscious image of femininity which, he argues, that same institution refuses and on which it relies” (Rose, *Why War?* 141–142).

such a legacy could perpetuate itself “when what it offers as the true content of that legacy is death” (*Why War?* 148).

Similarly, I would suggest that the enthusiasm displayed by Miller’s critics in recognising the authority of her writing (the “singularity”⁶ of her achievement as a poet, and her suitability as a “remarkable model”⁷ for other South African poets writing in English) is matched only by their reservations over the poetry’s content, specifically the sense of isolation and loss that appears to characterise her *oeuvre*⁸ and, I would argue, the implications of this content for the perpetuation of her literary legacy.

The question, therefore, that arises in response to both Klein’s and Miller’s corpuses of work and their preoccupation with negativity (in the context of a discussion on a nurturing maternal discourse) is how precisely to “take in,” and what can be made of, what they appear to be offering – a question that is amplified by the ambivalent identifications produced, and defined, in readings of their texts. Klein’s definition of the oral ambivalence of the process of identification, its closeness to devouring, suggests what might be at stake for the reader who desires to take in, to be influenced by, the work of a writer positioned as a literary mother: “The child is caught in an impasse, ‘the fear of destroying the mother in the very act of expressing love for her’” (Rivière qtd. In Rose, *Why War?* 163–164). My attempt to localise the

⁶ “In many ways Ruth Miller is one of the most singular poets South Africa has produced – I mean singular in the sense ‘alone: away from others’ [...]. With much to expect from her in the future, it would not be rash to predict that she is likely to become an influential and important innovator in English South African poetry” (Eglington 31).

⁷ “Miller occupies a central position in South African poetry [...]. The writers of COSAW [The Congress of South African Writers], in many cases engaged in developing their own criteria regarding aesthetic standards, will, I think, also find in Miller a most remarkable model” (Meihuizen 7).

⁸ For instance, Metelerkamp laments Miller’s blindness to “her own poetic achievements and to the comfort that human history might offer in an imperfect world” (Bason and Conolly 1025–26).

ambivalence attendant on my reading of Miller's poetry, neither in the figure of the writer nor that of the reader, but in the relation that constitutes the text, can be explored productively through and in Klein's theory of object relations.⁹

There are three major weaknesses with a reading model based exclusively on Kleinian psychoanalysis. The first relates to the topic of sexual difference and is touched on in Juliet Mitchell's introduction to *The Selected Melanie Klein*. Mitchell's introduction builds on remarks she made in an earlier paper (1983), a version of which was given as a talk at the Institute of Psychoanalysis in London: "The Question of Femininity and The Theory of Psychoanalysis". The title indicates the scope of Mitchell's research, her interest in the topic of sexual difference as a site for contestation and comparison within the field of psychoanalysis, and her stated preoccupation with the constitutive importance of this topic in the history of psychoanalysis. The itinerary of Mitchell's work on Klein and Freud can be traced to their specific inflection of sexual difference: Klein's work starts at the point where sexual difference has ceased to be a question:

Ultimately for Kleinian and non-Kleinian object-relations theorists [...] the distinction between the sexes is not the result of a division but a fact that is already given; men and women, males and females, *exist*. (274)

For Freud, it is the insistence of sexual difference as a question that comes to inform the entire psychoanalytic theory of subjectivity:

⁹ The argument that ambivalence is constitutive of *the relation* between mother and child clears up the confusion over ambivalence as a psychoanalytic term, and its more colloquial usage as a synonym for having mixed feelings: "It [ambivalence] refers to an underlying emotional attitude in which the contradictory attitudes derive from a common source and are interdependent, whereas mixed feelings may be based on a realistic assessment of the imperfect nature of the object" (Rycroft 6). The definition of ambivalence provided by Laplanche and Pontalis underscores my point that ambivalence is immanent in the relations between objects and not located in the object itself: "The simultaneous existence of contradictory tendencies, attitudes or feelings in the relationship to a single object – especially the coexistence of love and hate" (26).

Hysteria led Freud to what is universal in psychic construction and it led him there in a particular way – by the route of a prolonged and central preoccupation with the difference between the sexes [...] the question of sexual difference – femininity and masculinity – was built into the very structure of the illness. (300–301)

The orientation of Klein's work, its concentration on the preoedipal relation between the mother and the sexually undifferentiated child, and its neglect of the father (understood in Freudian terms as the agent of prohibition), effected a subtle shift in the topic of female sexuality that saw the mother, as already constituted female subject, absorbing much of the interest originally generated by the question of femininity. A shift that, in Mitchell's estimation, "represents an interesting avoidance of the question of sexual difference" (274). That this "avoidance" still carries the epithet "interesting" is suggestive: it reflects the attitude of critical ambivalence that characterises Mitchell's study of Klein and that appears to keep her from assuming a more narrowly feminist and recognisably polemical (for/against) assessment of Klein's contribution to psychoanalysis.¹⁰

In Mitchell's writing on Klein in this essay,¹¹ she redirects attention to the particularity of Klein's achievement by deliberately rehearsing the basic conceptual

¹⁰ In their fascinating book *Freud's Women*, Lisa Appignanesi and John Forrester make explicit their polemical intentions with their choice of introductory title, "Freud on Trial." In the interests of sustaining the argumentative style of their writing, their critique tends to overlook some of the startling distinctiveness of Klein's work, preferring instead to speculate impressively on the extent of her influence: "Klein's work pioneered a slow and subtle shift, one, perhaps, that transformed psychoanalysis more than any other single factor: the reorientation of the child's inner world around its relation to its mother. Mothers became models for the profession of psychoanalysis, mothering provided descriptions of what psychoanalysts were supposed to be doing; via the mother, the normative life-story was introduced...Freud's sexual mother had been ushered blushing from the analytic scene" (454).

¹¹ I have restricted my comments to the more recently published collection (*Women: The Longest Revolution* 1984) in the belief that this volume consolidates and revises much of the earlier material published in *Psychoanalysis and Feminism*, 1974. Mitchell's introduction to the book she co-edits with Jacqueline Rose, *Feminine Sexuality: Jacques Lacan and the EcoleFreudienne* trans. Jacqueline Rose (London: Macmillan, 1982) is reprinted in the 1984 collection under the title, "Freud and Lacan: Psychoanalytic Theories of Sexual Difference", 248–277.

discrepancies between the Kleinian school of object relations and Freudian theory, indicated by their conflicting treatment of the topic of sexual difference. Mitchell's restrictive critical strategy makes the crucial point that any theory drawing on Klein's version of the preoedipal realm will bear the mark of its "interesting avoidance" in the ambiguous figure of the "full" mother: "The mother who has everything is not 'feminine'; she is complete [...]. What Klein is describing here is the raw material, the plenitude of objects and feelings which the story relies on when it comes to construct itself, to fill in its gaps" (312). Mitchell actively produces a dialectical relationship between femininity (as the site of repudiation in Freudian theory) and the Kleinian mother (as the site of some notion of primary plenitude) to suggest a limit to interpretations of the preoedipal as the site of proto-symbolic resistance:

Motherhood purports to fill in the absence which femininity covers over and which hysteria tries not to acknowledge. From their positions along a continuum, motherhood and hysteria, to have or to have not, to be or not to be, constantly question each other (313).

The other weaknesses of Klein's theory are interrelated. One is attributable to what Greenberg and Mitchell identify as "stylistic characteristics" of her writing: "Her [Klein's] prose is dense with descriptions of primitive fantasy material. At the same time, she writes with great forcefulness and certainty, often resulting in overgeneralizations and hyperbole" (120). The other is attributable to the strong clinical emphasis of her theory:

The confusion in Klein's theory may arise because it is really more a descriptive phenomenology that sticks close to the complexity of her clinical material [...] Just as Freud theorizes the construction of what scientific theory itself is about, so too, Klein identifies and describes what intuitive identification and clinical observation are about: areas of confusion, fusion, lack of boundaries, of communicating without the differential structures of speech. (Mitchell, 30–31)

However, these are the very same weaknesses that have been identified and turned to such productive critical use in the post-structuralist work on language and subjectivity offered by, among others, Jacques Lacan and Julia Kristeva. In his assessment of Klein's case study of Dick¹² (a four-year-old boy who was, "in casual parlance, 'slow'"¹³) Lacan, while clearly ambivalent about the rigour of Klein's theory and her methodology, finds in the report of her play with the child a demonstration *par excellence* of the performative rather than constative function of interpretation in the analytic setting: "The success of her [Klein's] interpretation, its clinical efficacy, does not proceed from the accuracy of its meaning [...] but from the way this discourse of the Other situates the child, in language, in relation to the people who surround him, are close to him" (Felman, *Lacan* 114). Dick responds to Klein's intervention not because of its correctness on the level of the signified (what does it mean?) but because of its resonance on the level of the signifier (what does it do?). Lacan continues: "How does Klein's speech act produce the call in Dick? By calling him ('Dick-little train'), by naming him within the constellation of a symbolic structure, by thus performatively constituting him, through her own discourse, as a subject" (Felman, *Lacan* 118).

In her analysis of Klein's "ramshackle"¹⁴ theory, Rose traces the effect of the Kleinian concept of negativity (as a representation of the death instinct) on the

¹²First published as the paper "The Importance of Symbol Formation in the Development of the Ego" in the *International Journal* XI. Part I (1930) 724–39. Reprinted as an essay bearing the same title in Mitchell 95–111.

¹³ "He could barely speak, seemed indifferent to the presence or absence of his mother and nurse, displayed no emotion when he hurt himself, had great difficulty manipulating knives and scissors, and had the intelligence level of a fifteen- to eighteen-month-old child (to the extent that one can have faith in such evaluations)" (Kristeva, *Klein* 159).

¹⁴The word is Alix Strachey's and appears in one of her daily letters to her husband, James (English language translator and editor of *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*), written during her time spent in Berlin being analyzed by Karl Abraham. Among other

content and structure of her text (including the papers of her followers). She relates the perceived contradictions in Klein's theory, its loss of causal sequence and the conventional boundaries installed between the subject and object of scientific knowledge, and its massive inflation of the power of phantasy, to the untheorisable nature of negativity and its formative role in object relations (the inaugural "bad object") and symbolisation. Instead of blaming the opacity of Klein's text on her shortcomings as a writer or her inability, as a foreigner, to express herself clearly in English (in other words, instead of coming to the tautological conclusion that Klein's text is difficult to follow because it's difficult to follow), Rose offers an approach to Klein's work that relates the formal weaknesses of her prose to the difficulties immanent in her subject matter, that is, negativity, and its situation (according to Lacan) on the edge of speech.

Lacan's emphasis on the clinical force of Klein's brutal interventions¹⁵ (the effect it creates, not the content it provides), together with Rose's rereading of Klein's theoretical density as a tribute to the irreducible otherness of her subject matter opens up new ways of approaching aspects of Miller's poetry that have been identified as weaknesses in readings of her work. In the first instance, "the failure" of Miller's eloquence ("But Miller is consistently 'eloquent', and not consistently successful" (Meihuizen 5)) argues for a new attentiveness to language effects in

things, her letters testify to the perception of Melanie Klein among "a large section of psychoanalysts (all male)" (188) as "quite sound on practice, but feeble-minded about theory" (177). Alix Strachey's own more equivocal assessment of Klein's mind is that it "is really in an awful mess – tho' I also believe that it contains the key to many things" (Meisel and Kendrick (eds.) 195)

¹⁵"Melanie Klein, with this brute's instinct which characterizes her and which has, incidentally, made her perforate a sum of knowledge hitherto impenetrable, dares to speak to him" (112). And later: "She sticks symbolism into him, little Dick, with the utmost brutality [...] But it is certain that, as a result of this intervention, something happens" (Felman, *Lacan* 118).

Miller's poetry, how, by deferring meaning, the sound of Miller's words "produces the call" in the reader who writes her way after Miller's text in response.

Secondly, the insistence of ambiguities and contradictions in Miller's poetry ("They come up again and again" ("Alternatives" 20)) and its "lack of positive vision" (McGrane) that Metelerkamp contends stall and stunt the development of the Miller corpus could be read otherwise: as a reflection on the poetry's intimation of the frailty of language and the powerlessness of expression "to situate me for, or speak me to, the other" (Kristeva, "Stabat Mater" 175–176). In his essay on Emily Dickinson, Craig Raine fastens onto a line from Virginia Woolf's diary ("But by writing I don't reach anything. All I mean to make is a note of a curious state of mind") to point up both Dickinson's and Woolf's talent for representing pervasively phobic states of mind. His description of "[t]hese interior, fluttered, abysmal sensations" that "plague everyone" (*In Defence of T.S. Eliot* 98) could just as easily apply to Miller's poetry and its foregrounding of language as "simultaneously sign and symptom of phobia" (Jacobus, *First Things* 156). The quotation Raine selects from Woolf's novel *The Waves* that is reproduced below resonates with Miller's fascinated horror at the limits of representation ("The delicate tissue / Fails where it is fringed; how slowly" ("Cycle" 91)):

Also, in the middle, cadaverous, awful, lay the grey puddle in the courtyard, when, holding an envelope in my hand, I carried a message. I came to the puddle. I could not cross it. Identity failed me. We are nothing, I said, and fell. (98)

Boland's argument that the authority of the speaker in a poem grows "the more the speaker is weakened and made vulnerable by the tensions he or she creates" (186) contests Metelerkamp's version of Miller's repetitive contradictions as "weaknesses" inhibiting the development of her work. While it is true that the

tensions in her poetry might make Miller, as a literary mother, hard to follow or, to extend Metelerkamp's earlier metaphor of nurturance, difficult to take, as Metelerkamp herself acknowledges "it is precisely the presence of such contradictions which allows the reader to explore reality: to see why they exist and how they can be resolved ("Alternatives" 20). In other words, and for the purposes of my thesis, it is precisely the construal of aspects of Miller's poetry as "weaknesses" (or failures) and its opening up of imaginative opportunities for the reader (and an aspirant literary daughter) to separate provisionally from Miller's text that argues for her authority as a literary mother.

Kristeva structures her work on the semiotic along Lacanian lines: she borrows his concepts of the Real, the Imaginary and the Symbolic to elaborate her theory of a disruptive force in language traceable to the realm of the preoedipal mother. The semiotic, as I indicated before, is a language effect. It manifests itself in whatever is unreadable or marginal to the act of interpretation, including rhythms, ellipses, and alliterations. The semiotic is the trace of the Imaginary in the Symbolic; it is what disrupts the complete separation of language and the body. If the semiotic is active in language, it is because the logic of the Symbolic is immanent in the maternal and material prohibitions imposed on the body of the preoedipal child. As Kristeva explains in her book-length essay on the topic of abjection:

It is a 'binary logic,' a primal mapping of the body that I call semiotic to say that, while being the precondition of language, it is dependent upon meaning, but in a way that is not that of *linguistic* signs nor of the *symbolic* order they found. Maternal authority is the trustee of that mapping of the self's clean and proper body; it is distinguished from paternal laws within which, with the phallic phase and acquisition not of language, the destiny of man will take shape. (*Powers of Horror* 72)

Or, as Kelly Oliver puts it:

Both the primary maternal prohibitions and the infant's experience of maternal negation point to a rejection that Kristeva argues operates on a material level prior to symbolic rejection. This material rejection sets up the possibility of symbolic rejection, negation, and separation. (4)

Kristeva's formulation of a phase of abjection and the function of the abject in language is derived from her work on the preoedipal mother: "It [abjection] is death infecting life. Abject. It is something rejected from which one does not part, from which one does not protect oneself as from an object" (4).

It is thus not lack of cleanliness or health that causes abjection but what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite. (4)

Oliver elaborates:

Abjection is a transitional phase between dependence on the maternal body and independence from it [...] the borders between child and mother, nature and culture, subject and other [...] are called into question during this phase. (4)

The causal link Kristeva establishes between abjection and ambiguity ("We may call it a border; abjection is above all ambiguity" (*Powers* 9)) in the context of a relation to the maternal body suggests a particularly rich direction for a reading of Miller's poetry that interprets her literary maternity in terms of a textual relation. Kristeva emphasises, with Klein, the link between separation from the mother and the onset of symbolisation,¹⁶ but points to the impossibility of ever completing such a separation by preserving, actively, the unsettling force of ambiguity in language.

Although I will be drawing on Kristeva's work quite extensively, I will also modify her approach with reference to Johnson's critique of literary theories modelled on the preoedipal mother-child relationship. Briefly, Johnson argues

¹⁶ "In truth, *matricide*, which Klein was the first to have the courage to consider, is, along with envy and gratitude, at the origin of our capacity to think" (Kristeva, *Klein* 12–13).

against the monumentalisation of autonomy (understood specifically as independence from the mother) as the very structure of maturity, and urges the revision of models measuring development by the standard of only one gender:

If the father stands for distance and the world and the mother stands for closeness and the home, then the more like the father one is, the more mature one is considered to be. According to this hierarchy of development, a woman would almost by definition never achieve full maturity, especially since she is constantly in danger of falling into symbiosis by becoming a mother herself. (*World* 142)

She suggests, with reference to the poetry of Mallarmé, a rethinking of the notion of maturity (“A tolerance for incomplete separation could be seen as differently mature from an insistence on total independence” (143)) to include a wider spectrum of relationships, and a refiguration of the mother through the analysis of the mother as writer: “The figure of the mother should be analysed as the subject of discourse rather than as the source of life or the object of desire and anger” (143).

My own questions about Kristeva’s work and the possibility of its inter-implication with poetry are, in many ways, consistent with my questions about Miller’s poetry in relation to the notion of literary maternity. For instance, what resistance does the body of writing articulated as Kristevan theory offer to its inter-implication with literature? Does it compel certain readings and deactivate others? Is there an effect reliably produced by the theory that we can isolate and call “Kristevan” and which serves to remind us of the irreducible otherness of her subject matter, the pre-symbolic realm of the first mother? Moreover, what insight can we gain from the suggestion that a theory concerning itself with threshold states and activities, littoral zones, the fungibility of place, a theory that conjures edges only to crumble them, might engender, in its readers, a partiality for boundaries? That theory, as Johnson suggests, is its own self-resistance? That writerliness is

ultimately conservative? Or: that the entry point to any reading is inevitably conditioned by a restriction, an enabling prohibition, that functions to limit ambiguity and simultaneously to preserve actively that ambiguity as a critical resource through a process variously called “abjection”. These questions will be pursued with reference to the topic of literary maternity in the body of my thesis.

Turning to a discussion of my response to Miller’s work, I have always found reading her poetry a profoundly ambivalent pleasure. Her skill with words, the force exerted by single words used in surprising contexts and combinations in her writing, far from being unchallenging,¹⁷ is precisely what makes the poetry difficult and compelling. The words assume a materiality, or a singularity, that undermines the referential function of language by drawing attention to the status of words as artefacts and, in so doing, to the status of representation as fabrication, or fetish (Kristeva’s “[she knows] the sign is not the thing, but just the same” (*Powers* 37)).

Miller’s words call up other words and associations that seem to click together in complex patterns that leave the reader feeling dazzled but dissatisfied. Her poetry often appears to actively resist, or defer interpretation (according to Abrahams, as a reader of her own poetry Miller had “no patience for analytical criticism” (*Miller* 13)), and it attracts and repels the reader in turn. We might see this ambivalence towards making certain things unequivocally clear (“who exactly is who and what are they all up to?” (Rose, *Sleep* 55)) as a property of poetry itself. Even if we concur with Johnson’s definition of poetry as “precisely the repository of knowledge about the resistance of language to intentional dissolution” (*World* 7) it is still worth asking what

¹⁷ Commenting on the poem “They” Metelerkamp writes: “One of Miller’s emotions which ‘would unseam / in articulate love’ might be passionate resentment against the achievement of success through poetry which is deft and articulate but is unchallenging” (“Father’s Law or Mother’s Lore?” 66).

readers want with or from Miller's poetry, what makes of "its own / Long, long knowledge" (Miller, "The Glove Box") an object of desire.

They will forgive the stone
If it does not strive
Through its compressed grain
To spread and come alive.

Let the clay, they say,
Remain dumb, unfired,
Not leap towards the shape
Of a stinging spire.

They will not forgive
That which would unseam
In articulate love,
And the woken dream.

I have included Miller's poem "They" in this introduction as an instantiation of poetry's "knowledge". Metelerkamp reads the poem as a resentful description of the inhibiting effects of philistinism on creative work and she understands the word "they," although unspecified in the poem, in terms of a gendered, oppressive power stunting the productivity of the artist.¹⁸ Her reading overlooks (has to overlook perhaps, as a condition of its possibility) the inevitably restrictive activities of all readers, the fact that no reader would be excluded automatically from the "They" of Miller's poem, whatever the demonstrable goodness of her intentions. Reading the poem from this uncomfortable position of implication (a reader being read) redirects attention to the desire of the reader to understand a text and to offer a definitive reading that assumes an inhibiting authority over other interpretations by delimiting what a particular text can do or say.

¹⁸In Metelerkamp's "Her own lines," a poem about reading Dorothy Wordsworth and Ruth Miller, she uses the third person pronoun "They" to protest the kind of patriarchal exclusions she detects in Miller's poem: "'They' didn't know she wrote poems; / no hint of her song / drowned out by / William's demanding voice" (*Floating Islands* 15).

Readers are less accustomed to having their intentions queried than writers. (In Miller's case, a poet whose published volumes are out of print, it might seem like gross ingratitude on her part, or on the part of her literary estate, to interrogate the motives of a reader who is in the process of drawing attention to the writer's text.)¹⁹ What are the reader's intentions? If she positions herself as the daughter-reader in relation to the mother-text, does she want to identify with the mother, take her words in, and thereby risk incorporation with her? Does she wish, as I will be suggesting of Metelerkamp's rereading of the Miller corpus, to save the mother? The reader is always late (an acolyte and a pretender) and often preoccupied with how she can tailor the text to fit her own theoretical design, to offer a majestic reading of a text that cannot, despite its best efforts, claim to be comprehensive ("what was / The word missed, when we were so enthralled / Shaping and cutting our imperial palls" (Miller, "Across" 45)).

In the poem, the stone, that seemingly indivisible object that blunts all attempts at penetration, will "be forgiven" on condition that it remains reducible to named properties, that is, identifiable as a stone. Self-difference (*différance*), like incomplete separation, is not tolerated. Recognition within the binary system of language and sexual difference is predicated on the illusion of self-identity and reducible difference. Unseaming, un-separating, gestures towards an ambiguous relation not accommodated explicitly in the Symbolic, a relation negotiated before

¹⁹In his capacity as publisher of Miller's collected works, Douglas Reid Skinner remonstrates with Miller's daughter over her intemperate and ungrateful response to Lionel Abrahams's introduction to the volume: "Indeed, it is most likely that much will be written about Ruth Miller, and particularly in response to and around this book, during the next few years, and none of the authors will require or seek your consent. This book, regardless of your personal feeling, will be the instrument of reviving the neglected literary fortunes of your mother, and for that, one has Lionel Abrahams to thank; it is his patience and dedication in recent years which have ensured that most important literary revival" (Unpublished correspondence, January 1991).

time and the onset of language proper and characterised by maternal prohibitions and material negations: the imaginary duality of the preoedipal mother and child.

Accordingly, the clay of the second stanza could be read as the self-difference of the stone. It must not be interfered with, fired, so that its potential to change states (from malleable to hard) and to sting like a stone problematises the relation of absolute, naturalised and objectively visible difference between the stone and the clay. The permission given to treat the identity of the clay as resolved (“Let the clay, they say”) acts as a permission to accept the referential function of language and, within a psychoanalytic context, the self-evidence of sexual difference. Could the maternal function in Miller’s poetry work both as a permission to interpret (that is, to separate and recombine meanings, or unbind and bind) as well as a deferral of that interpretation through its suggestion of the possible randomness of language, the ambivalence of “the woken dream”?

In addition to reading Miller’s published work in something of the way suggested above – that is, to read the poetry in relation to the topic of literary maternity and the relation between the reader and the text she produces in terms of the phantasies (particularly phantasies of separation) and transactions indicated in the Kleinian preoedipal – I will also draw on her unpublished poems and correspondence stored in the Miller Collection at the English Literary Museum in Grahamstown, as well as one of the more under-sourced acquisitions to the Abrahams Collection, a sequence of letters exchanged between Abrahams and Miller’s daughter, Pat Campbell, more than a decade after Miller’s death.

The letters offer the reader different opportunities to “unseam” the institutional boundaries constructed between the “Miller” corpus and the “decades-long debris” (Miller, “The Glove Box”) that collects at its edges and that indicates the

proximity of familial and institutional interests in the constitution and administration of Miller's literary legacy and its relation to her poetry. The relation I propose to explore is a textual one. The letters are not read as though they lie outside the play of textual effects that constitutes the acts of writing and reading.

It is also worth considering the fact that Campbell's letters go unmentioned in Metelerkamp's thesis and article (or in any of the critical writing directed towards Miller's poetry) in which she draws regularly on other private papers. It would seem that either the documents were not made available to her, or she found them unhelpful for her purposes. The third possibility, that Metelerkamp (who self-consciously positions herself as a literary daughter to Miller) chose not to refer to the letters, or actively excluded them from the Miller corpus that she reconstituted in her reading, provides me with an opportunity to speculate on the place of the letters now. Where do they belong? How do they unsettle the boundaries of that corpus (do they?) again? Could the letters (the texts of the real daughter) constitute "the expelled abject that haunts the subject [the maternal corpus] as its inner constitutive boundary [...]" (McClintock 71).

The insertion of the real daughter's voice into the conversation around Miller's legacy (what it looks like; who gets to decide what can be done with it) is valuable, not as a source of truth or as an absolute reference, but as something like a margin that functions as both barrier and channel to that conversation. What the letters present the reader with is a record of another life, no less textual, that in its astonishing one-sidedness and incompleteness, reminds the reader of the limits of her knowledge: what she thinks she knows about Miller and her relation to Miller's text. In this way, Campbell's letters could constitute the "nothing" between the reader and Miller's text that keeps the reader from thinking that she "knows."

Reflecting on the intended addressee of her mother's poem, "Come Not Unto Me," in a letter to Abrahams, Campbell makes a suggestion that sounds like a question: "Perhaps there is an unknown 'other'?" (4 December 1991)

This is provisional separation.

Chapter One

Soft-covered, padded, marked “Boudoir Long”
But no price. Hence the commerce of love can remain
At its own value, remembering you
Who were no Boudoir type, whose only length
Was in a man’s stride, who
Walked over the hillsides; planted order
On the flat veld, went to village meetings,
Learned to leave people alone, learned further
When to show strength
Quietly, like a good Victorian.

Grandmother-dead you lie alone on the hill
Who was never – always too strong for – the image
of “Granny”.

The daughter of your daughter brought as a gift
The glovebox, unearthed from what decades-long debris,
Not to be used for gloves – that was understood,
But refurbished, freshened with lace, to hold
Cosmetics, a dab of cottonwool, and its own
Long, long knowledge.

– Ruth Miller “The Glove Box”

Miller’s poem “The Glove Box” has particular resonance for anyone (a would-be literary daughter for argument’s sake) contemplating the state of her legacy forty years after her death uncertain what to make of the “unearthed” material (as well as the “decades-long debris”) that survives her. The poem could be read as a comment on the paradox of preservation, how in holding on to something, or trying to keep it the way it was (letting the Miller corpus stay in one piece), we also thereby ensure its neglect and hasten its demise (it rests in peace).

The description of one daughter’s unthinking retention of her mother’s glove box comes to stand for the inevitable failure of any literary enterprise founded on ideas of authorial intention, an original text or, as will be discussed below, a definitive reading – one version of the Kleinian definition of identification as something that

devours its object. It is not without interest either that the act of transmission dramatised in the poem is between women only and that it lacks a definite origin or end: the glove box with the unverifiable provenance (“But no price”) passes from grandmother to daughter and back to daughter again (the word “mother” does not appear on its own in the poem) with no sense of its proper place or true owner ever being established.

The link suggested in the poem between the potential for creative reinterpretation (reading) and death (understood here in the Kleinian sense of phantasised separation from, or loss of, the mother) is reflected in Johnson’s observation that “[t]o read is indeed to treat as dead” (*Mother Tongues* 176–177). Among other ideas I take from the poem is the suggestion that to be fully responsive to Miller’s text (to enable and make desirable the reading and rereading of her writing), the reader, like the granddaughter in Miller’s poem, has to risk reading Miller’s text in ways that she might have consciously refused (what Abrahams calls driving Miller “wild”) or in ways that remain attuned to the ambivalence of her writing without claiming to be “in tune” with it, that is, able or inclined to explain it away. Unlike the granddaughter, and in order to separate provisionally from Miller as literary mother, the reader has to know she is taking a risk.

Before exploring the issue of Ruth Miller’s literary maternity and its implications for a reading of her poetry further, I would like to take a step back and pose the question of what “Miller” is, or might be, to give some indication of what confronts the reader, or stands in her way, on her opening up of the Miller corpus. In addition to providing some literary background to the shaping and naming of the Miller corpus, my consideration of the question of what “Miller” is, is intended also to suggest what a reader of her work might have to separate from provisionally in order

to open up Miller's *oeuvre* to more interpretation and to the testing of new connections.

The visibility of Miller's work in South African literary criticism (relative to other South African women poets) as well as the general readiness on the part of her critics to view her as influential and a remarkable model for successive generations of South African writers argues for the definition of "Miller" as an opportunity to write a thesis and "to feel somehow part of a critical debate" (Metelerkamp, "Alternatives" 3). This despite the fact that the time of the "critical debate" is past and all Miller's books are out of print.

The name "Miller" has been invoked in various studies and with varying success to give shape and integrity to a body of work that might otherwise appear fairly unformed – a reflection not only on the provisional nature of the work's boundaries (the existing relation between published and unpublished material), but also on the perception that it shows little development: its central contradictions "come up again and again" (Metelerkamp, "Alternatives" 20). "Miller" is the name that ensures the continuity of the first volume of poetry, *Floating Island* (1965) with *Selected Poems* (1968) and the posthumous collected writing, *Ruth Miller: Poems Prose Plays* (1990). The last title brings together the two volumes of poetry (any duplicated poems have been eliminated but their omission is marked with an asterisk in the list of contents) and the published material is supplemented with a selection of previously unpublished material: uncollected poems (1960–1969) and prose (two verse plays, a semi-autobiographical story and an essay).

In addition to the rejected poems ("perhaps half the available material" which is preserved in an archive "for study by specialists" (Abrahams, *Miller* 17)) there are at least two previously published poems that could be counted among "the fine

pieces” that “have gone astray” (16): “South Africa Now” (*Fighting Talk*) and “Cage” (*The Purple Renoster*). Miller’s unpublished prose includes personal correspondence with Guy Butler and Jack Cope, stored at the National English Literary Museum in Grahamstown, while the novel she refers to having written in a letter to Butler and that is described as “disintegrating somewhere on a top shelf with a suitcase” (26 May 1958) has no archival existence.

If the above information testifies to nothing more than the effects of ordinary editorial intervention and the incursions of time on the shaping of a literary *oeuvre*, it also provides some context for the following suggestion of what “Miller” is, namely, “the creation of masculine critics working within the parameters of their tradition” (Lockett, “Stranger In Your Midst” 190). In his capacity as Miller’s literary executor and as the editor of her posthumous collection of writing, Abrahams selects the texts for inclusion in the collected volume, and his introduction, along with Charles Eglington’s “Homage to Ruth Miller,” provides a framework for the reception of “Miller” and her writing. In this instance, and in the criticism offered of the work elsewhere by the group of male critics Metelerkamp dubs the “Chapman School” (Michael Chapman, Ridley Beeton, Lionel Abrahams) in her conference paper and master’s thesis, “Miller” is the name of an autonomous, sovereign imagination whose “poetry stands without the story [of her personality and her life]” (Abrahams, *Miller* 10).

The disembodied “Miller” of the posthumous collected writing bears only a passing resemblance to the phenomenological-sounding “authorial voice” of the same name to which Joan Metelerkamp’s “reading of the body of poems has given substance.” Here “Miller” might refer to an individual voice, but its articulation “with the ideology of her [Miller’s] time” (“Ruth Miller” 5) means that it is a voice inflected

by gender and history and, as such, is previously unheard. It is in this sense that “Miller” could name “an inventorial awakening,” one moment (among others) in literary history in which “the formerly unvoiced speaks and is heard” (Johnson, *World* 31).

To write about the Miller corpus, as the above discussion demonstrates, is to be confronted with, and to create, competing and differently compelling representations of her work in its relation to her life. It is no simple matter, as Rose recounts in her book-length study of reading Sylvia Plath, to separate the poet’s voice “from those who speak for her”, adding in parentheses that “(a large part of her [Plath’s] writing was published and, more importantly, edited after her death)” (*The Haunting of Sylvia Plath* 2). Without wanting to overstate the similarities between the literary legacies of Miller and Plath, it seems that the openness, or vulnerability of both writers’ texts (of all texts, arguably) to the exigencies of different historical moments and discourses (modernism, feminism, the South African cultural debate and, more recently, “ecologically aware criticism”²⁰ in Miller’s case, to name a few) is what makes the act of reading them such an uncertain and interminable undertaking. Like the glove box of the poem that began this chapter, Miller’s text can be taken apart and given different emphases (from the glovebox of the poem to the Glove Box of its title) or transformed in new readings (refurbished and freshened) to hold new contents, but “its own / Long, long knowledge” (what remains to be represented) is, seemingly, inexhaustible.

To acknowledge the openness of texts to different interpretations is not to pretend that all versions of “Miller” enjoy equal authority or visibility in local literature (The Glove Box as compared to the glovebox). The shifting preoccupations and

²⁰ Wendy Woodward, “‘Dog[s] of the Heart’: Encounters between Humans and other Animals in the Poetry of Ruth Miller” in *The English Academy Review* (18) 2001, 73–86.

priorities of the literary academy and the vagaries of publishing mean that the “Miller” that survives tends to be the ready-made creation of anthologies and South African literature courses and rarely the more intractable voice that speaks across the collected work and the critical debates that once claimed to represent it. As stated before, all Miller’s books are out of print. The process of literary sedimentation that begins by closing Miller’s work off from all but the most narrowly instrumentalist re-readings – “lost / O lost to the bliss of any more remembering” (Miller, “Long Since Last” 66) – ends with judgements like this one from Wendy Woodward that “Metelerkamp’s reading of Miller is generally incontestable” (74). The “Miller” of the above quote is a settled matter, “sealed and socketed” (Miller, “Spider” 41) from literary history, the congealed remains of a reading event that was concluded some time ago and that, for the most part, so it would appear, leaves nothing more to be said.

Instead of presenting Metelerkamp’s historical intervention in the Miller corpus as an opportunity to continue a process of reading that is, or could be, without end, the winner-takes-all logic of the above approach presents her intervention as its terminus. The authority of Metelerkamp’s reading, the hard-won “sense of power over material which otherwise speaks of impotence” (*Ruth Miller* 20) that it sought to offer readers (particularly women readers) of Miller’s *oeuvre* at one time, is now a barrier to their participation in that *oeuvre*. In a strange twist, Metelerkamp’s enabling critique of Miller is the one readers of her work now have to get around, or beyond, to separate from even, before they can speak. This is the moment of interpretive triumph that “The Glove Box” poem both recognises as necessary and regrets, when a transformative act (the improvised glovebox of the granddaughter’s making) is monumentalised as an incontestable reading (the Glove Box of the poem’s title). It is

central to my thesis that Metelerkamp's critique is also the one that explicitly advocates Miller as a literary mother. "Miller," as the name of a critique that is described as "generally incontestable" or, to use a term from another discourse, "full," is now also the phallic mother, the site of perfect knowledge and power.

Without wanting to detract from the pervasive power and value of Metelerkamp's reading, I would like to suggest that its monumentalisation as "incontestable" in the critical literature describing Miller's work might be traced back to its passage through a national discourse on culture and history in South Africa that made "contestation and the spectacle of contestation" (J.M. Coetzee in David Attwell (ed.), *Doubling the Point* 342–343) its preferred method of engagement. The national discourse on "South Africa's cultural imperatives" (Ingrid de Kok and Karen Press (eds.), *Spring is Rebellious* 9) referred to above is the South African cultural debate – a series of urgent exchanges on the topic of art and politics that appeared in local literary journals in the late eighties. By the time Metelerkamp came to publish her article on Miller ("Ruth Miller: Father's Law or Mother's Lore?" (1992)), the South African cultural debate was superseded by the renamed "Sachs cultural debate" and redeployed by the ANC as part of its programme of national liberation.

In the discussion that follows, I will show that the "Miller" of Metelerkamp's "incontestable" reading is, in some ways, a relic of a set of negotiations that happened at a particular time in South Africa's cultural history and whose moment, while not entirely past, is receding. For, if it is true that, among other things, Metelerkamp's materialist reading of Miller's work taught Michael Chapman to distrust "the 'pre-structuralist' belief that although thoughts, interests, cultures and power structures may change, great poems remain the same" ("Ruth Miller: Breaking Silences?" 13–14), it is also the case that the literary criticism describing the poems,

however “great,” is subject to the same critique. Again, this is not to deny the value of Metelerkamp’s reading of Miller, but to engage with its limits in order to make possible other readings of the Miller corpus.

Metelerkamp’s broadly-speaking combative reading of Miller’s *oeuvre* (including Miller’s unpublished letters to Butler), her exasperation with the insistent contradictions of the poems, and her diagnosis of Miller’s “nihilism” could be a reflection of what she thought she was up against (“the Chapman School”) when she opened the Miller corpus as well as the demands, personal and historical, she makes on Miller’s text. As I will show later, these demands have their roots not only in the feared dispossessions and qualifications of the cultural debate, but also in Metelerkamp’s reading of Miller as a particular kind of literary mother. By returning to the debate that contributed to the intellectual climate in which Metelerkamp’s reading of Miller took shape, it is also my intention to return to the “authorial voice” of Metelerkamp’s reading to show that “the ideology of her [Miller’s and “Miller’s”] time” with which it is articulated is equally, must be, the time of the cultural debate.

The overview of the critical response to Miller’s work that follows will draw specifically on the commentary offered by Metelerkamp, Chapman and, more peripherally, Abrahams and is intended to scaffold my approach to the cultural debate and, later, to the topic of Miller’s literary maternity in the literary criticism that describes her *oeuvre*. It will become apparent from the discussion that follows that I am less interested in commenting on the content of the respective critical positions occupied by the writers listed above than in giving a sense of the terms in which the readings surrounding Miller’s work are constituted and in using the readings as a point of departure for my own.

The discussion that follows thereafter, in which I cite the positions of Chapman and Metelerkamp in response to Miller's poetry at length, suggests the extent to which these positions (particularly in relation to materialist and post-structuralist approaches) might have been informed and constrained by the changing permissions of the South African cultural debate. In other words, reviewing Chapman and Metelerkamp's articles on Miller's poetry in light of the arguably authoritarian discourse on culture in South Africa at the time might allow us both to recognise the points of contiguity in their critical approaches, and to ask questions that their "debate" over Miller in its very constitution necessarily excludes.

How, for starters, do the preoccupations of the cultural debate affect Chapman and Metelerkamp's treatment of fundamental questions of motivation and methodology in their re-readings of Miller's poetry? To what extent are the transformation imperatives of the cultural debate behind their attempted recuperation of Miller's "voice" for "a post-apartheid South Africa" (whether this involves, in Chapman's case, determinedly hearing Miller speak as "a white South African woman of the 1960s" or, in Metelerkamp's case, conferring literary maternity on Miller)? Further, how does the celebrated identification and airing of contradictions among participants in the cultural debate as the guarantor of vigorous social exchange contribute to the perception that meaningful exchange is predicated on the exclusion of uncertainty, doubt, and ambivalence? Given my particular interest in the topic of literary maternity, I will, for the most part, confine my exploration of these questions to Metelerkamp's critique as it appears in her article ("Father's Law or Mother's Lore?") and her nomination of Miller as a literary mother.

Metelerkamp's description of her difficulties with the critical approach of what she terms "the Chapman School" in her conference paper and master's thesis ("Ruth

Miller and a Poetry of Loss”) provides a convenient entry point for my discussion. Briefly, she identifies as problematic the Romantic and modernist assumptions underwriting this criticism, and takes issue with its treatment of Miller’s poems as self-identical, closed systems; its neglect of questions of gender identity in the production of her art; and its obliviousness to contradictions in the poems through the mystification of the recurrent theme of suffering and loss. Although Metelerkamp distinguishes between Chapman’s valorisation of Miller’s “essentially tragic vision” (*South African English Poetry* 151), and Abrahams’s characterisation of her as “a passionate stoic” in his article “Terrible to the Cage: A Tribute to Ruth Miller” (16), she detects in both designations a desire to obscure the place of human history in Miller’s poetry through an appeal to the universalising notion of transcendence in the work of art. She argues instead for a socialist feminist approach and draws on the Marxist concepts of praxis and dialectics in her attempt to value the contradictions in Miller’s work. For Metelerkamp,

[r]eading Miller’s poems in this way, coupled with a growing sense of the specificities and limitations of the socio-political circumstances which produced them (apartheid at its height, censorship – the voice of Authority booming particularly loudly) gave me a sense of power over material which otherwise speaks of impotence. (“Ruth Miller”20)

Chapman’s response to Metelerkamp’s “objections” appears in the article “Ruth Miller: Breaking Silences?”²¹ published in the same year (1990) that Carrefour brought out *Ruth Miller: Poems Prose Plays*, and that Metelerkamp submitted her master’s thesis. In the article Chapman explicitly distances himself from his earlier

²¹ The article was first delivered as a paper under the same title at an AEUTSA conference in Stellenbosch, July 1990. Cecily Lockett claims in her thesis that Chapman’s article in which he “admits that recent gender criticism has led him to re-evaluate his approach to Miller’s poetry” was “an oblique reference to my [her] work [*Breaking the Silence: A Century of South African Women’s Poetry* (1990)]” (“Stranger in your Midst” 194).

work on Miller, and the liberal humanism of Abrahams's approach, claiming that he finds

it increasingly difficult to separate Miller's poems from biographical, social and literary contexts. As a result, I suppose I am less inclined today than Abrahams to continue reading Miller centrally as a humanist, universalist poet, who is only peripherally a white South African woman of the 1960s. [...] Abrahams's introduction [to *Ruth Miller: Poems Prose Plays*] perpetuates the "pre-structuralist" belief that although thoughts, interests, cultures and power structures may change, great poems remain the same. (13–14)

In contrast to Abrahams's apparent interest in the transcendental value of Miller's poems, Chapman expresses a desire to re-read Miller, "to hear [her] speak as a woman," and "to examine the commonly held view that her personal absorption virtually negated her political character" (14). "Turning first to feminist perspectives," he offers a short critique of Metelerkamp's 1986 conference paper:

Metelerkamp identified "contradictions" in Miller as signs of her subscription to roles of victimization while urging readers to investigate these contradictions for the material causes of Miller's pessimism in relation to a "wider social context of which the poems themselves are hardly aware." The problem was not only that Metelerkamp underestimated the difficulties attendant on choice and action, but she did not follow up Miller's several recognitions of, and struggles against, the constraints that society has placed on women. (14)

In conclusion, he concedes that "[e]ven if it did not in itself make much headway, however, the paper offered the valuable idea (aspects of which I shall try to pursue) of a materialist re-reading of Miller's poetry" (14–15). In the course of the article, he offers sample readings of a few of Miller's poems and indicates a more specific itinerary for his materialist re-reading, referring particularly to the approach adopted by Adrienne Rich in her work on Emily Dickinson: "It is not enough, said Rich, to read the words on the page. We need to involve ourselves in the narrative of the poems –

to read the contradictions, the suppressions, the silent words in the spaces between the poems” (17).

While not explicitly post-structuralist, Chapman’s interest in the more conventionally “disposable” aspects of Miller’s text can be traced back to comments he made about Kristeva at a master’s students’ seminar in April 1990, and again in an AUETSA conference paper later that year. According to Metelerkamp, he spoke on both occasions “about the possibility of re-reading Miller’s poems for their slippages and, along Kristevan lines, for the evidence of the ‘semiotic’ as opposed to the ‘thetic’ [...]” (“Ruth Miller” 20).

The Kristevan semiotic is “a psychosomatic modality of the signifying process” (*Kristeva Reader* 96) that is oriented and structured around the mother’s body and that gives way, through bodily excess, to a thetic break into the Symbolic. The semiotic and the thetic (contrary to Chapman’s misleading remarks on their possible opposition) are heterogeneous and work together to produce signification. The presymbolic (or preoedipal) semiotic is restrained by the syntax of the thetic and inhabits language as a kind of pulsional pressure that manifests itself “in tone, rhythm, the bodily and material qualities of language, but also in contradiction, meaninglessness, disruption, silence and absence” (Eagleton, *Literary Theory* 188).

Leaving aside the precise psychoanalytic implications of Kristeva’s theory for the moment, it is possible to discern a connection between her preoccupation with the semiotic, “this other scene of presymbolic functions” (*Kristeva Reader* 95), and Rich’s attentiveness to “the contradictions, the suppressions, the silent words in the spaces between the [Dickinson’s] poems.” What Chapman seems to be advocating in both instances is a materialist re-reading of Miller’s poetry that includes a consideration of the materiality of the signifier in its relation to both socio-historical

and psycho-linguistic constraints and, broadly speaking, the unconscious. His version of Rich's attentiveness to the previously unread narrative of the poems, as suggested by the quote below, is to fill any perceived gaps in the text with biographical information:

Thus we reconstruct the texts not as objects but as the manifestations of a subjectivity, while retaining the text. The events of Miller's life, her class position in Yeoville [...] her marriage, her disease, her opportunities in writing circles – all of this needs to infuse our response to her accents and tones. (17)

According to Metelerkamp, Chapman's proposed Kristevan re-reading

will do little to redress the loss Miller's poems register unless it in some way empowers the reader. In other words, such a reading becomes only the obverse side of New Criticism unless it is accompanied by a political perspective which analyses the extent to which authority is concretely challenged and how, or whether, it empowers the reader to challenge authority. ("Ruth Miller" 20)

Metelerkamp's comparison of New Criticism with Kristevan theory draws on the relation articulated in Marxist criticism between the excessive formalism of certain literary theories and their political quietism. As Terry Eagleton elaborates in his reading of the Kristevan semiotic, "she [Kristeva] pays too little attention to the political *content* of a text, the historical conditions in which its overturning of the signified is carried out, and the historical conditions in which all of this is interpreted and used" (*Literary Theory* 190–191, his emphasis). Eagleton's interest in the grounds of reception for a Kristevan reading resonates with Metelerkamp's concern for the reader in the act of interpretation as compared with Chapman's foregrounding of the subjectivity of the writer. Metelerkamp's preoccupation with the reader's welfare or "needs" in the unfolding of a reading informs her approach to Miller and the issue of her literary maternity, an observation to which I will return later in the thesis.

Metelerkamp pursues the question of authority (her examples are the apartheid state and the academy) and the potential disenfranchisement of the writer and reader confronted with authoritarian discourse in her article “Ruth Miller: Father’s Law or Mother’s Lore?” She argues for the historical materialist concept of “appropriate authority” and the need in South African literature for writers (and especially women poets) to “nurture” their work through an enabling act of identification with their literary mothers and the adoption of a maternal aesthetic that “has to do with valuing material process and feeling our necessary links with each other” (69).

She concludes the article by citing what she calls an “appropriate authority” – Adrienne Rich – on the question of the legitimacy of art in the context of political struggle. For Metelerkamp, Rich’s comments on the inter-implication of politics and spiritual continuity in Nicaragua provide the affirmation she seeks “for writing in a post-apartheid South Africa” (70), a mandate for continuing with her own demonstrably marginal pursuit of English lyric poetry. Metelerkamp’s approving reference to Rich’s description of art in Nicaragua “as a precious resource to be made available to all, one necessity for the rebuilding of a scarred, impoverished, and still-bleeding country” (185) appears in contrast to her critique of Ingrid de Kok’s 1989 paper on the validity of de Kok’s own poems in South Africa. Metelerkamp argues that

in constructing for herself the question of legitimacy at all, in entering the domain of some imaginary people’s court (a different kind of Authority from Miller’s, certainly, but a potent one) de Kok is not using the maternal, nurturing, capacity we can all foster, particularly post-apartheid, which would say “my creation has a right to exist.” (69)

Metelerkamp’s search for affirmation for her poetry in the context of a nation-building discourse in post-Apartheid South Africa, as well as her disaffection with

academic authority, recall remarks made by Chapman in an earlier article on the political appropriateness of post-structuralism in South African literature, with special reference to J.M. Coetzee's novel *Foe*. The article (published in 1988 under the title "The writing of politics and the politics of writing: On reading Dovey on reading Lacan on reading Coetzee on reading...?") was one in a series of exchanges appearing in local literary journals as part of the South African cultural debate. The contrast Chapman draws between socially legitimate narratives employing anti-deconstructivist "strategies of finality" and "[J.M.] Coetzee's 'deconstructions,' their easy appropriation by institutions of higher education and distance from the *arché* and *telos* of black South African history" (334), conforms to the binary oppositions that had constituted (and circumscribed) the cultural debate up to that point, namely: academic/activist; coloniser/colonised; discourse/history; theory/action; Western/indigenous; *différance*/identity. With the intervention of Albie Sachs, a white ANC activist and returning exile, the terms that had "dominated progressive cultural discourse over the last ten years" (de Kok 11), were supposedly overturned.

Sachs's seminar paper, "Preparing ourselves for freedom" (originally presented at an ANC in-house seminar on culture in Lusaka in 1989,²² and published in *The Weekly Mail* in February 1990),²³ advises against "the dangers of a too narrowly defined political expectation of and prescriptiveness about art" (de Kok 9). It

²² The timing and focus of the seminar (1989) and the publication of Sachs's paper (February 1990) at a crucial stage in the ANC's return from political Coventry as "sole negotiator for the popular resistance with the regime" suggests that the debate had less to do with culture than cultivation: part of a broader ANC initiative to cultivate "a wide range of anti-apartheid opinion, including both white liberals and black consciousness supporters" in its ascendancy to political power (Callinicos 174).

²³ The paper was given specific orientation in two books: one anthologising twenty-two responses to the paper, including Sachs's afterword/addendum (Ingrid de Kok and Karen Press (eds.), *Spring is Rebellious: Arguments about cultural freedom by Albie Sachs and respondents*); the other devising and recording a paradigmatic interview conducted with writers, cultural workers and academics, modified accordingly (Duncan Brown and Bruno van Dyk (eds.), *Exchanges: South African Writing in Transition*).

is anchored in a cultural discourse emphasising pluralism and contradiction, and argues, in liberal humanist terms, for the celebration of difference. Sachs's paper was credited by de Kok (and others) with stimulating a freer debate among a wide assortment of South African cultural practitioners "than had been heard for decades" (de Kok 9), one that encouraged a re-examination of old, false oppositions and that broke "the existing rhetorical stranglehold that had at best tolerated, at worst neutralised, the interventions of preceding critiques by Ndebele, Van Wyk, Gordimer and others" (de Kok 11).

The glorification of the Sachs paper²⁴ and its attendant debate as the illustration *par excellence* of post-Apartheid South Africa finding its cultural voice could be treated as an opportunity to reflect more soberly on the impoverished state of public debate in South Africa in general. In his book *Justice in South Africa*, Sachs refers approvingly to an observation made by Professor John Dugard in a "controversial" inaugural speech "that comment or criticism which was commonplace in other countries was often *avant-garde*, daring and even dangerous in South Africa" (259). Aijaz Ahmed repeats the observation in an institutional context with his description of the "beleaguered space" that "the individual practitioner of academic radicalism comes to occupy [under pressure from the lingering Thatcherite-Reaganite consensus that exists in the metropolitan culture at large]" (*In Theory: Classes, Nations, Literatures* 65).

Metelkamp's reading of Miller bears the marks of its emergence at the time of the cultural debate and its passage through the debate (from, supposedly, prescriptive to pluralist discourse), not only in its critical orientation (what

²⁴ "What emerges...is the sense that the debate is only just beginning, that the discussion which Sachs's paper has generated is the start of a necessary re-evaluation of the relationship between literature and political events in the light of important changes within South African society"; "Albie Sachs's paper 'Preparing Ourselves for Freedom' evoked a response unrivalled in our recent cultural history" (Brown and van Dyk vii).

Metelerkamp refers to as a socialist feminist approach) but also in its embattled rhetoric²⁵ (and concomitantly restricted self-critique) and its reliance on binary oppositions. Metelerkamp's master's thesis and her article on Miller (discussed below) testify to Metelerkamp's interest in the dialectical process of identifying and resolving contradictions through an analysis or, in Miller's case, a separation of, her historical circumstances from her subjective interpretation of them. Albie Sachs's afterword to the book, *Spring is Rebellious*, reveals a similar belief in the value of exposing contradictions: citing a comment from a carefully chosen appropriate authority, Samora Machel, who "used to say that to know the taste of an avocado pear, you had to cut it in half – in other words, let the contradictions come out" (de Kok 148), Sachs shows that the reward for dividing the pear into two (a pair) is the knowledge of how it tastes, "*to know the taste.*" Once this has been ascertained, it becomes possible to talk about the taste of an avocado pear as a singular phenomenon (one we have singularized) and to mobilize it as a metaphor whose effectiveness is appreciated instantly.

Sachs's acknowledgement of contradictions in the cultural debate, among other things, might have made the old oppositions of the debate more subtle, but his intervention falls short of falsifying their construction as binaries. Like Metelerkamp's identification of contradictions in Miller's poetry, the Sachs debate throws into relief the certain exercise of identifying a contradiction with the more tentative one of admitting an ambivalence.

²⁵Metelerkamp attributes the defensive tone of her thesis to her confrontation with academic Authority: "My reading has not only been called crude and reductive (by a previous "authority" who eventually withdrew her supervision) but illegitimate and wrong" ("Ruth Miller" 23).

The title of Metelerkamp's article ("Ruth Miller: Father's Law or Mother's Lore?") offers an interesting contrast to the studied pluralism and allusiveness of Chapman's article title ("Ruth Miller: Breaking the Silences?") and can also be read as a comment on, among other things, the perceived political radicalism of formalist theories such as the Kristevan semiotic. Her shutting down of the homophonic play between "law" and "lore," the play of the signifier, with the binarism, father/mother, suggests that, however much Chapman's proposed Kristevan re-reading of Miller may "sound like" Metelerkamp's materialist critique, its formalist orientation means that it serves political interests opposed to those furthered by materialism. It is in this sense that the binarism of Metelerkamp's title, father/mother, can be seen to inform (and en-gender) other oppositions in the article (formalist/materialist; academia/lyric poetry; authority/identity) that I will argue limit her engagement with some of the more problematic implications of her own approach to Miller's poetry.

In Metelerkamp's analysis of the marginalised status of lyric poetry in South Africa, she identifies "the authority of the academy" and its privileging of "other forms of writing than poetry" as a decisive factor. Later on the same page, she speculates on the usefulness of poetry, suggesting that, "perhaps lyric poetry is most useful for the insights it gives us (as dreams do) into the grappling of individual, gendered, historical psyches with the complex struggles of experience" (57). Whatever the merits of this suggestion, it is also the case that the usefulness of any text, in terms of materialist literary theory, is related to its form and the historical context of its interpretation. In his remarks on the foregrounding of poetry by New Criticism, Eagleton observes that: "In the case of modern literary theory, the shift into poetry is of particular significance. For poetry is of all literary genres the one most apparently

sealed from history, the one where ‘sensibility’ may play in its purest, least socially tainted form” (*Literary Theory* 51).²⁶

Metelerkamp’s discussion of the marginalisation of lyric poetry by the South African academy fails to consider the relation between literary form and political usefulness suggested above. She overlooks both the impact of the discourse on political transformation in post-apartheid South Africa (the cultural debate), and the limitations of her own intellectual and political formation in relation to the attacks on her position by “academic Authority.” The unexamined opposition academia/lyric poetry should not be read as confirmation of the radicalism and value of lyric poetry or the political vibrancy of marginalised practices. On the contrary, by historicising the relation between poetry and literary theory, we draw attention to questions on the political implications of reading and writing English lyric poetry in South Africa, and we open up the potential for self-critique by exploring the possible motivations behind Metelerkamp’s interest (and, by implication, my own) in the topic of Miller’s literary maternity.

For a woman poet, at least, it may be crucial to claim links with her literary predecessors in order to grapple with some of the contradictions which press upon her now. For our generation Ruth Miller is one such literary mother: while we were growing up on the segregated playgrounds of apartheid she found herself up against the equally insidious imaginative constraints of Verwoerd’s Law. (“Ruth Miller: Father’s Law or Mother’s Lore?” 57)

²⁶ W. H. Auden’s often-quoted line from his poem “In Memory of W. B. Yeats” that “poetry makes nothing happen” could be read as a version of Eagleton’s assessment of poetry. What Auden meant by the line is, of course, open to interpretation: did he mean that poetry is ineffectual, unworlly, inconsequential i.e. that it changes nothing? On the other hand, is he saying that poetry makes nothing (i.e. that category of events or happenings that conventional historical accounts sideline and that involve doubt and questions and accident) happen, that poetry provides people with a space and a language to think about (and possibly remember) experiences that other forms of writing don’t or can’t? And, if it’s true that poetry, as opposed to propaganda or sloganeering, constitutes a different kind of knowledge or discourse from History (the record of important people and events), one that responds to History’s certainties with uncertainty and one that survives, isn’t it also true, therefore, that poetry is indispensable to any real or meaningful encounter with the past?

Metelerkamp's nomination of Miller as a literary mother appears to derive, in part, from the theoretical orientation of her own critical work on Miller ("When I began my thesis, I was reading feminist and materialist theory till it came out of my ears" (McGrane)), the authoritative position occupied by Miller's work in South African English literature in general, and the historical appropriateness of the relation for Metelerkamp's generation of women poets ("while we were growing up on the segregated playgrounds of apartheid...").²⁷ In her statement that "For a woman poet, at least, it may be crucial to claim links with her literary predecessors" ("Ruth Miller" 57) Metelerkamp seems to want to limit her identification with Miller as literary mother to their shared status as woman poets. In the discussion below, I will suggest that Metelerkamp's identification with Miller as a literary mother extends to her reading of Miller's poetry, which she reads with the expectation that her needs as a daughter will be gratified.

The discursive environment of Metelerkamp's work on Miller (its foregrounding of socially legitimate narratives over other kinds of literary productivity) and her sensitivity to the sidelining of English lyric poetry in and by the academy could argue for the interpretation of her interest in Miller as a literary mother for white, English-speaking South African poets as a strategy against cultural dispossession ("using the maternal, nurturing, capacity we can all foster, particularly post-apartheid, which would say 'my creation has a right to exist'" (69)).

Metelerkamp's search for a literary forebear might, in part, constitute a response to the transformation imperatives of the South African cultural debate – an

²⁷ If Metelerkamp has "got over the social/settler/colonial issue" as she claimed in an interview with Michelle McGrane in 2006, the above remark shows her preoccupation with questions of personal legitimacy at the time of writing her thesis on Miller. The connection she makes between her generation's apartheid childhood and Miller's oppression by "Verwoerd's Law" foregrounds not only their shared, if different, experience of authoritarian rule, but also their implicit resistance to or, at the very least, awareness of, apartheid's lived distortions. It foregrounds their shared moral conscience.

interpretation that could go some way towards explaining her “too narrowly defined political expectation of and prescriptiveness about art” (de Kok 9), this time, the art of a literary mother. In other words, and as I indicated in the preface, the demands Metelerkamp’s reading of Miller’s *oeuvre* makes on Miller’s poetry to conform to a nurturing maternal aesthetic that excludes other arguably maternal responses (ambivalence, phantasy and negativity) could be traced back to the narrow ideological space in which Metelerkamp was operating and within which she was trying to make her work viable. Metelerkamp’s reference in a recent interview to her “having got over the social/settler/colonial issue” (McGrane) makes clear the pervasive force of the debate and her embattlement by the binary oppositions that constituted (and circumscribed) it at the time.

The difficulties I continue to encounter in trying to define Metelerkamp’s notion of Miller as a literary mother derive from the close relation of her master’s thesis on Miller to her first and second volumes of poetry. The timing of the submission of Metelerkamp’s master’s thesis and the publication of her first volume of poetry (*Towing the Line* which includes a poem called “Ruth Miller”), as well as the subject matter of her second volume (*Floating Islands*, a sustained meditation on the poems and lives of Miller and Dorothy Wordsworth who both wrote poems called “The Floating Island”) suggest that her poetry was birthed from her theoretical engagement with Miller’s work.²⁸ For this reason, it is easy to conflate Metelerkamp’s motivation for researching Miller’s poetry in her master’s thesis with her recommendation of Miller as a literary mother for other poets despite the fact that the recommendation appears in an article published after the completion of her master’s

²⁸ An impression that is confirmed by a remark made by Michelle McGrane, and that goes unchallenged in her interview with Metelerkamp that “*Floating Islands* was conceived from the years of work on your [Metelerkamp’s] thesis.”

thesis. Metelerkamp does not refer explicitly to Miller as a literary mother in her motivation for her thesis or in the body of the thesis itself.

Among the reasons cited in her 1986 AUETSA (Association of University English Teachers of Southern Africa) conference paper “The Poetry of Ruth Miller: Alternatives to Tragedy” (that predated the publication of Miller’s collected writing by four years) for her choice of Miller’s poetry as an English master’s research topic, Metelerkamp includes her interest in South African women poets, and her “desire to feel somehow part of a critical debate” (3). Metelerkamp’s comment at the time that there was “no criticism at all on English poetry written by South African women, other than that on Ruth Miller’s work” (“Alternatives” 3) testifies to the relatively high level of interest in Miller in South African literary criticism and the visibility of her literary legacy. Miller’s poems continue to feature in South African English literary anthologies and her poetry surfaces in local university literature courses and school curricula.²⁹

In fact, the visibility of Miller’s work (relative to that of other South African woman poets) in local literature and the persistence of the poems’ cultural significance or institutional life in South Africa could be used as proof of her poetry’s ongoing authority and influence, or as an argument in support of Miller’s *de facto* instalment as some sort of authority figure in the South African literary canon. This despite Metelerkamp’s contention that “Miller is a little known poet” to many students of English (*Miller* 241) and the apparently questionable political relevance and doubtful appeal for “the contemporary woman reader” of Miller’s *oeuvre*. Chapman retails the setbacks he and Abrahams had to overcome in the mid-eighties when

²⁹ Miller’s poem “Penguin on the Beach” was included in the unseen poetry section of the Independent Examination Board (IEB) National Senior Certificate English Literature paper last year (2011).

they approached both local and overseas publishing houses with the idea of returning Miller's poems to print in a volume of her collected work:

The idea was rejected by three local publishers, all of whom felt that Miller was too remote from current concerns. Seen in terms of political relevance, this is a judgment with which the author of *The Poetry of Commitment in South Africa*, the other full-length study of our poetry, would concur. Jacques Alvez-Pereyre, for his part, ignores Miller. Similarly, neither The Women's Press nor Virago was interested in Miller: poetry, it was confirmed, does not pay; at the same time, Miller was deemed to have little to say to the contemporary woman reader in South Africa or abroad. (Chapman 14)³⁰

The volume, ultimately published by Cape Town publishing house Carrefour Press in 1992 (with the working title *The Surviving Ruth Miller* changed to the marginally less contentious *Ruth Miller: Poems Prose Plays*)³¹ is now, along with Miller's earlier volumes, *Floating Island* (1965) and *Selected Poems* (1968), out of print. This "Miller," the one who is politically out of touch and has little to say to contemporary women, is made to "lie alone on the hill" like the grandmother of "The Glove Box" poem. Read as a comment on the state of Miller's legacy, the line "Grandmother-dead you lie alone on the hill" carries the suggestion that the Miller corpus, like the long-dead grandmother of her poem, is removed and completely

³⁰Metelerkamp provides a similar account in her master's thesis: "Despite the fact that critical response to Miller's poems has been very positive (if also very limited) both Donker and the Natal University Press refused to publish Abrahams's manuscript on the grounds that it would not sell. Similarly, according to Chapman (seminar, April 1990), who was involved in the negotiations to publish the volume, the perhaps more sinister 'silencing' was on the part of Virago Press who refused to publish it arguing that it would have little to say to contemporary South African women. It was left to the relatively new publishing house, the Cape Town-based Carrefour Press, to publish what one hopes will be a much read volume" ("Ruth Miller and a Poetry of Loss" 3).

³¹The word "surviving" in the first title raises questions about who decides which texts come to constitute the surviving Ruth Miller (editorial interventions), which version of the poet is attached to her collected works, as well as the soundness of this publication (will it ensure the survival of her legacy)? The published title implies that all Miller's work is represented in the book i.e. that it is Miller's complete works. Metelerkamp asks further: "[I]s 'Ruth Miller' part of the title or not? Whether the title is *Ruth Miller: Poems Prose Plays* or *Poems Prose Plays* makes a difference as to how one perceives the author. Is the author of the recovered voice Abrahams or Miller?" ("Ruth Miller" 25) The question of whose voice has been recovered in the volume of Miller's collected work is one I will pursue later.

remote from its readers (“alone on the hill”). The compound adjective “Grandmother-dead” invites comparisons with the proverbial state of lifelessness associated with extinct species like the dodo (“as dead as a ...”), or with inert, unfeeling matter like stone (“stone-dead”).

Further, Miller’s putative inability (not artistic disinclination) to solve the contradictions of her social and literary context (and her failure, therefore, in Metelerkamp’s account, to develop her art) like the repressed existence of the “good Victorian” grandmother of the poem, assumes the morally questionable force of a lie. Looked at in this way, the line “you lie alone” starts to read more like a spell invoked by the daughter-reader, in her institutional guise as Virago or The Women’s Press, to keep the dead at bay (“Leave people alone” starts to sound more like a desperate plea to be left alone), or more specifically, to deny her implication in past compromises. In other words, as daughter-curators of Miller’s legacy, the publishing houses’ rejection of Miller’s *oeuvre* suggests that they want its lie, or possibly its line, to end there, “alone on the hill.”

In many respects, as Metelerkamp’s remark on the visibility of Miller’s literary legacy in contrast to other local women poets suggests, and as I have indicated before, the move to install her as an authoritative figure in South African English literature was well under way before Metelerkamp intervened. The reception of Miller’s two books of poetry when they were first printed (1965 and 1968 respectively) was generally sympathetic among critics (on publication of her first volume of poetry, *Floating Island*, Miller wrote to Guy Butler: “There were some filthy reviews – notably EP Herald and Davis – but some very good, kind ones too –” (16 December 1966)) and she was widely hailed as an important influence in South African literature and a potential model for other poets. Cecily Lockett makes clear in

her assessment of the poetic tradition in South Africa and its selectively male line that “Ruth Miller is the only woman to be included in this line-up [of South African male poets writing in English] since her modernist style and tragic vision have allowed her work to be appropriated by the mainstream tradition” (*Breaking the Silence* 19).

The difficulty with the argument that would want to relate Miller’s literary maternity to her visibility in local literature is that her inclusion in the tradition demands her invisibility as a woman. The conscious identification of and with maternal figures in literature by other feminist writers is one way that feminism has challenged the absorption of women writers into a tradition that demands the effacement of their gender as a condition of inclusion in that tradition. For this reason, many women poets and critics have seen it as their task, a specifically feminist and historically motivated one, to rescue women writers, even recognised talents like Miller’s, from the insidious “silencing” that attends their membership in the all-male club of, in this case, South African English literature. This means that if Metelkamp looked to Miller as some kind of literary mother potentially granting her and other aspirant women poets the permission to write, it was also the case that her vision of Miller’s literary maternity had to contend with the complexity of Miller’s own relation, and relating, to her poetic past, how her ongoing implication “with old signs” (Boland 235) and enthusiastic approval from the male literary establishment (her “only length / Was in a man’s stride” (“The Glove Box”)) might detract from Miller’s fittingness (or willingness) to sanction a “revolt against patriarchal authority” (Gilbert and Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic* 49).

Of course, it is a mainstay of feminist criticism that revisionary work must be done on texts to bring previously hidden meanings and suppressed resistances to

the surface. The way to rescue Miller as a literary mother according to one school of feminism is to offer a rereading of her work that deliberately links her maternity to her feminine persona, not simply the prominence of her work, by putting back into her text what Lockett has called “the feminine aspects of Ruth Miller’s work” (“Stranger In Your Midst” 190) which, to anticipate the discussion below, would seem to refer to the material conditions of its production.

Metelerkamp’s intervention in the Miller *oeuvre* differs from previous readings of Miller’s work in its insistence on the centrality of Miller’s socio-historical context to any thoroughgoing assessment of Miller’s poetic achievement. She identifies the exclusion of this context from the orthodox evaluation of Miller’s literary achievement up to that point as the single biggest challenge to the survival of her legacy. In so doing, she comes up against a literary practice so familiar as to seem innocuous: “Just about every woman modernist has been at one time or another [...] praised for literary and technical ‘mastery,’ lauded for the production of textuality, but ignored ideologically and politically” (Mary Lynn Broe in Scott (ed), *The Gender of Modernism* 19).

Metelerkamp is not the only woman critic to revisit Miller’s *oeuvre* with a recuperative strategy in mind. In Chapter 5 of her doctoral thesis “Stranger In Your Midst: A Study of South African Women’s Poetry in English” (1993) Lockett proposes to examine the work of Miller, Ingrid Jonker and Eva Bezwoda for traces of “anger at their oppression and their ‘otherness’ as women and as poets” (189) through a feminist and psychoanalytic lens. She opens her study of Miller with the following statement:

Ruth Miller, as she is known to South African readers of poetry, is the creation of masculine critics working within the parameters of their tradition. They have produced her as a poet in their own

image and according to their own patriarchally determined perceptions of the woman poet. (190)

I used the word “recuperative” above to describe the reading strategies of both Metelerkamp and Lockett in response to Miller’s poetry. Despite differences in their methodologies (Lockett’s approach is more markedly instrumentalist), both readings seek to recover Miller’s “voice” for a new generation of readers, particularly women, through “a reinvention of what reading is, such that the formerly unvoiced speaks and is heard” (Johnson, *World* 31). Their approach is consistent with Johnson’s definition of a radical theoretical revolution, in this case feminism, as “an inventorial awakening”; its impulse can be traced back to formative feminist texts like Virginia Woolf’s *A Room of One’s Own* (1929) in which she exhorts the woman writer to think back through her mothers and to search for forerunners (like the fictive Shakespeare’s sister in the excerpt below) as a matter of survival.

She [Shakespeare’s sister] lives in you and in me, and in many other women who are not here tonight, for they are washing up the dishes and putting the children to bed. But she lives; for great poets do not die; they are continuing presences; they need only the opportunity to walk among us in the flesh. [...] Drawing her life from the lives of the unknown who were her forerunners, as her brother did before her, she will be born. (111–112)

Woolf’s materialist critique of the literary tradition points up the need for women writers and readers to intervene in its exclusions through a radical change in their reading habits: by consciously seeking out other women writers from the past in order to read their work and to identify with them, the work of these female forebears will give rise to new poets and a tradition through which their work will be sustained. Boland’s version of this process reads: “The poems read by the poets who wrote poems which were read by other poets. In such downright ways traditions are made” (215).

Metelerkamp refers explicitly to the need for women poets to search for “appropriate authority” with which to identify so that they can “nurture” their work through the adoption of a feminist maternal aesthetic that “has to do with valuing material process and feeling our necessary links with each other” (69). Lockett aims to “offer an alternative or feminine perspective” on Miller’s poetry (Lockett, “Stranger” 223). Both are versions of the process of inventorial awakening and “discovered” inheritance described above.

On a first reading, Metelerkamp’s approach to the topic of Miller’s literary maternity seems to situate Miller’s maternity exclusively in what Johnson calls “a feminine *persona*,” (Johnson, *World* 137) that is, in Miller’s identity and historical experience as a woman poet and, possibly, her maternal attitude as a woman poet towards younger writers. Abrahams’s remarks on Miller’s generosity towards younger writers in his introduction would provide Metelerkamp with a convincing argument in support of Miller’s literary guidance and its resonance with Metelerkamp’s concept of a nurturing maternal aesthetic:

She [Miller] believed steadfastly in the value and significance of creativity (the warm generosity of this faith, which, for example, inspired the guidance and encouragement she gave the younger writers she met, was a most attractive and nutritive quality of her personality) [...]. (13)

As explained in the introduction, Johnson contrasts this approach with her own wish “to situate what is maternal in the work of French poet, Stephane Mallarmé (“Mallarmé as Mother”) as a *function* or *structure*, defined not in terms of a female *figure* but in terms of a specific set of interactions and transactions that structure the relation between the earliest parent and the child” (*World* 137–138, her emphasis).

Johnson’s approach concentrates on the letter of Mallarmé’s text; she lists characteristics of his poetry as reflected in the critical literature surrounding it and

compares them with Margaret Mahler's psychoanalytic descriptions of preoedipal development. Mahler's account of psychic development (termed "separation-individuation" or "psychological birth" (Johnson, *World* 138)) traces the infant's emergence from symbiotic fusion with its mother into independent statehood. Mahler's interest in the child's ambivalence towards separation from the mother prompts Johnson to explore the notion of a maternal function in Mallarmé's poetry in terms of the ambivalent textual transactions taking place between the reader and the text and produced through the act of interpretation.

Metelkamp's approach is similarly preoccupied with a relation, this time between the reader and the authorial voice she substantiates in the course of her reading of Miller's work. Even though Metelkamp might not state explicitly at any point in her critique of Miller's poetry that she is reading Miller's writing as if it were the work of a literary mother, it is clear from her impatience with certain aspects of Miller's text that she is coming to it with expectations that resonate with her concept of a nurturing maternal aesthetic: "I was looking for *work* which would speak to me of life and presence and possibility" (McGrane, my emphasis). In other words, Metelkamp is holding against Miller's text its seeming inability to live up to her expectations of it – expectations based on her preconceptions of what a literary mother's voice should sound like in order to carry ("speak to me") and, in the sense of a literary legacy, carry on ("life and presence and possibility").

Searching for an alternative femininity free of the dictates of patriarchal, oedipal law, one feminism has turned to the preoedipal relation between mother and girl-child only to find [Melanie] Klein's account of early psychic processes standing in its way. Too negative, this account blocks the new identification, troubles the ideal. Against the idyll of early fusion with the mother, Klein offers proximity as something which devours. (Rose, *Reading Melanie Klein* 129)

Metelerkamp's nomination of Miller as a literary mother for "our generation of women poets", which also presented me with the point of departure for my thesis, seems to follow the formulation given above. Searching for an alternative femininity free of the dictates of patriarchal, oedipal law, Metelerkamp as a woman poet situated in the male-dominated tradition of South African literature turns to Miller as literary mother only to find Miller's poetry standing in her way.

To return once again to the poem that opened this chapter, "The Glove Box," Metelerkamp, like the daughter-speaker in the poem who cannot let her version of her mother go (she is "Grandmother-dead" only), projects onto Miller's text her expectations of an ideal, nurturing literary mother. For this reason, the textual traffic in her reading appears to go in one direction, focusing all its critical energy on the text's ability to respond to Metelerkamp's (the daughter-reader's) needs. Until recently,³² and despite her careful framing of the entity "Miller" as "an authorial voice" to which her reading gives substance, Metelerkamp overlooks her implication in the text she reads on any but her own terms. In other words, instead of creating opportunities in her reading of Miller's work for the poetry to reinterpret her idea of literary maternity, a reciprocal relation that would allow "Miller" to put back into the picture all those aspects of maternity that the maternal ideal tries to exclude and that the Kleinian preoedipal relation foregrounds (symbolisation, loss, ambivalence, death), Metelerkamp situates herself outside the text ("let us in, let us in" ("Ruth Miller" *Towing the Line* 120–121)) and restricts Miller's literary maternity to the

³²Metelerkamp has commented in a recent interview that her thesis on Miller (where she argued "that Miller was unable to resolve her ambiguity in relation to the power of her own work") might have centred on "*my* [her] problem, not Miller's. I wasn't blaming Miller for her lack of 'positive' vision (because I did find sociological explanations for it), but I was fighting it. Perhaps I didn't understand the extent to which she did *hold* the contradictions, even if she could never resolve them" (McGrane, emphasis Metelerkamp's own).

instructive value that her writing and her mistaken aesthetic theory could offer younger women poets.

Felman reflects on the limitations of a critical approach that comes to the text being studied from a position outside it in her description of a certain kind of psychoanalytic reading: “[T]he relation of interpretation is structured as a relation of master to slave; [...] literature’s function, like that of the slave, is to serve precisely the desire of psychoanalytical theory – its desire for recognition” (“To Open the Question” 5–6). Literature, in this scenario, is made to serve theory in a way that reduces reading to an act of recognition, what Johnson characterises as “a form of violence to the otherness of the object” (“The Frame of Reference” 239), where the referents of any given text become fixed and the play of language is constrained. Thus, the insult is sustained on both sides of the relation: literature is made to occupy a textual space that is both finite and homogenous as it awaits interpretation by a more powerful discourse, and theory, like the constitutively dissatisfied master or colonizer of Felman’s figuration who fails to engage in reciprocal relationships, cannot grasp the specificity of any confrontation or reading it initiates. Johnson’s questions, “Why am I reading *this* text? What kind of act was the writing of it? What question about it does it itself not raise? What am I participating in when I read it?” (*World 3*) are reduced to the more anxious, “Here is a text, what can I recognize of it?”

By deliberately conflating the non-reciprocal reading relation (daughter/mother) suggested by Metelerkamp’s approach to Miller’s poetry with that of master/slave, we begin to sense what Metelerkamp’s assumption of the identity of the daughter-critic of Miller’s work does to her reading of the poetry as well as to redirect critical attention to those questions that Metelerkamp’s formulation of Miller’s

literary maternity presents as indifferent. What is it about Miller's *poetry* (besides the apparent serviceability of her historical experience as an object lesson for other poets) that might make her nomination as a literary mother seem appropriate to Metelerkamp and other readers? Is there an effect reliably produced by the poetry and discernible in the critical literature responding to it that suggests a quality we could call "maternal"? How do the meanings attributed to Miller's poetry affect the viability of her legacy? And, taking into account the specificity of its literary form, what could the attribution of a maternal function to Miller's poetry tell us about the limits of any academic undertaking or knowledge adventure that presupposes the representation of an "other"?

It is in this way, I would contend, that Metelerkamp's socialist feminist reading of Miller's work is unable to account for the effect of the poetry on her own productivity as a poet, a version perhaps of Boland's insight that "Ideology is unambiguous; poetry is not. As a younger poet I had discovered that feminism had wonderful strengths as a critique and almost none as an aesthetic" (236). Much more than an object lesson in how to grapple with the contradictions of her historical position as a woman poet now, it is clear from Metelerkamp's own experience of reading Miller that Miller's poetry moves her would-be literary daughter to write back, at length, in poetry. Metelerkamp's preoccupation with one version of literary maternity and a feminist maternal aesthetic (the one that Miller's "lack of positive vision" cannot live up to) blinds her to the peculiarly enabling relation she enjoys with Miller's poetry. Her sense that Miller's poetry ("the hard case of metaphor" ("Ruth Miller" *Towing the Line* 120–121)) is standing in the way of her identification with Miller as the ideal literary mother of her nurturing maternal aesthetic keeps Metelerkamp from recognising that the gap Miller's lack of positive vision opens up

between her version of a nurturing maternal aesthetic and Miller's poetry is what gets (and keeps) Metelerkamp writing. The "hard case of metaphor," the empty glovebox, the lack at the heart of Miller's text functions as an invitation, a pretext for the other to speak.

Metelerkamp's unsatisfactory experience of reading Miller with what she calls a "socialist feminist" agenda in mind, demonstrates that anyone coming to Miller's work in search of an article of faith, or certainty, is going to be disappointed. The insistence of the ambiguities in Miller's poetry ("They come up again and again" (Metelerkamp, "Alternatives" 293) and the poetry's intimation of the powerlessness of language and the frailty of identity (what Metelerkamp calls Miller's "nihilism" (McGrane)) make Miller, in Metelerkamp's account of the literary mother, hard to follow or, to extend Metelerkamp's earlier metaphor of nurturance, difficult to take. Miller's "lack of 'positive' vision" (McGrane) is something, so Metelerkamp implies, that younger women poets should learn from and get beyond – a version of the Kleinian mantra that, in order to think and to access symbolisation, the mother must be left behind. It is precisely the issue of the "weaknesses" (or failures) of Miller's poetry and the kinds of imaginative opportunities these fault lines open up for the reader (and an aspirant literary daughter) that I shall be exploring at greater length in the following chapter.

To return to the poem that opened this chapter and that has informed its thinking: the central insight of "The Glove Box," that to keep something alive and in circulation we have to turn it into something we can use, chimes with Metelerkamp's materialist, reader-oriented approach to the revival of the Miller's corpus. (On a more immediate level, and taking into account the embedded "love" in the object's name,

the poem seems to echo the now-hackneyed dictum that to love something you must let it go.)

At the same time, the last stanza of the poem points to the limitations of the granddaughter's intervention and argues for, in the context of reading, the interminability of interpretation. Her act of transformation and unambiguous rejection of the unearthed box's original purpose ("that was understood") maintains a certain symbolic fidelity to its precursor: its lacy refurbishment may disguise the box's past, but the function and implications of the cosmetics container, like that of the original glove box, is "to hold" accessories used in the performance of gender identity³³ and boundary demarcation (the private boudoir from the public world of commerce). In addition, the poem's use of expressions like "the commerce of love" and its location of gloves (what McClintock might call "threshold objects") in the boudoir, suggest that the "understood" or unambiguous difference between the old and the new, public and private, that the box is meant to represent is only apparent.

The glove box moves from the public (a commercial container for gloves) to the private (an improvised "holder" for cosmetics); from grandmother to daughter (never called "mother") to granddaughter and back again to daughter; from the social distinction of "*Boudoir Long*" to the socio-historical abjection of "decades-long *debris*" (its ambiguous outsider status is maintained through the articulation of its downwards trajectory in "borrowed" French); from the specific and syntactically separate "The Glove Box" of the title, to the spatially collapsed "glovebox" of the final stanza, or the other way round (if the title of a poem, like a preface in a book, comes last).

³³The phrase "dab of cottonwool," suggests at once the noun (a modest amount of cottonwool) and the verb (a light touch in applying make-up or tending to trivial ailments). Both bring to mind a feminine and maternal attitude.

The poem reads like a wish for translation, it longs (the word “long” insists in the text) to re-describe or re-member, retrieve, the body of the mother through language. Instead, it remains confined (boxed) within the argumentative reductions of gender positions, and measures lack of femininity (“otherness”) in masculine terms (“in a man’s stride”) and through overdetermined historical references (“a good Victorian”) that assume an inhibiting interpretive consensus. The passivity of the feminine boudoir is replaced with the activity of masculinised colonial agency and its conspicuous performance of control (“planted order / On the flat veld”) and command (“Walked over the hillsides”) through the spatial activity of boundary demarcation: a deliberate mapping of the discourse of empire onto the ambiguous because insufficiently contrasted “flat veld/felt” space of colonised social and sexual relations. McClintock discusses the inter-implication of domestic space and the public geography of empire through her documentation of the “peculiarly Victorian paranoia of boundary order” (47). It is in this sense that the gloves are seen as threshold objects, carrying traces of the outside into “polished interiors,” and providing and explicitly enforcing boundaries between bodies.³⁴

The poem opens with a series of seemingly object-less qualities that suggest luxury and comfort at an unspecified price (“Soft-covered, padded, marked Boudoir Long”). The empty glovebox they describe, as a container of saleable goods, is not itself for sale; it has no exchange value. It is excessive (too long), the remainder of a transaction, “the commerce of love” (the psychoanalytic “primal scene”?) that is past (soft-covered, padded, marked) and that resists translation in the present (“the gift”)

³⁴ “The middle class was preoccupied with the clear demarcation of limit and anxiety about boundary confusion – in particular, between private and public – gave rise to an intense fetish for cleaning and a fetishistic preoccupation with what the anthropologist, Victor Turner, calls liminal, or boundary, objects” (McClintock 170).

brought (up? about?) by “the daughter of your daughter” (a formulation that is itself too/two long, “long, long,” in terms of “daughters”). The absence of a price draws attention to the superfluity of the box; at the same time, it brings the grandmother to mind, makes her present (the granddaughter presents her mother with a memory).

If we treat the poem as if it were a narration of the Kleinian play technique, it yields the following “discarded” objects, bracketed off from the rest of the poem through their inclusion in inverted commas: “Boudoir Long” and “Granny.” The former are the words that appear on the outside of the box to specify its contents (gloves that are long gone) and that serve now to mark an absence. The latter, “Granny,” as an image that has no descriptive power, also marks an absence, something that is “too strong” to be named within the poem. The words on the box and the designation “Granny” mark precisely those places in the poem where language stalls, where it “won’t tell” or “can’t tell,” where its referential function is suspended, it “*lies* alone.”

The appearance of the verb “to hold” at the end of the line that describes the box’s transformation (“But refurbished, freshened with lace, to hold”) weighs the line down and creates a contrast with the lightness of the fresh lace. Other associations emerge: lace, or a lace, can also *hold* something in place; tied laces were used to compress a woman’s waist so that her body would conform (hold) what was considered a feminine form by the fashion of the day. The word lace comes to English through Old French and Latin where it referred originally to a noose. This use of the word (and words, like objects, come to us with their “own / Long, long knowledge”) introduces more sinister aspects into the poem: ideas of poison and the lacing of someone’s drink or food. The reader’s uncertainty over what she is taking in with the words of the poem is present from its first line and its intimation of

something concealed, muffled, or embedded. Something that should make sense (“marked”) but has no context (“But no price”).

What the granddaughter unwittingly discovers and presents to her mother in the form of the refurbished glovebox is the evidence of another life, one that would have required an enormous effort of imaginative empathy from the daughter to infer. The “discovery” of the box is an occasion for sentimental reflection and, for the speaker at least, wary speculation: the self-contained Victorian Grandmother was not all she seemed. It does not require a particularly attentive reader to pick up the ambiguity in the line: “Grandmother-dead you *lie* alone on the hill” (emphasis my own). The image of the formidable grandmother (“Who was never – always too strong for – the image / of ‘Granny’”), her independence, and what could be called her “social and personal reticence” (Abrahams, *Miller* 10) (she learned “to leave people alone”), seem to disarm any attempt by the daughter (or by analogy, the reader) at sentimental identification with her predecessor – grandmother and daughter remain, or should be kept (the poem implies), at arm’s length (no direct contact, gloved). The speaker’s portrait of her hands-on mother in “The Glove Box” is as much of a caricature as the label “Boudoir Long”: it boxes the grandmother and drains her of any complexity. Does a daughter’s relation to her mother come at the cost of her ever seeing her mother outside her role as provider and gratifier of the daughter’s needs?

The granddaughter, unlike the speaker in the poem, sees that the box is available for renewal and reinterpretation, that it can be filled with new contents. The owner of the box is “Grandmother-dead” with the implication that the granddaughter can transform what the grandmother left behind because she is dead to her. For the daughter, on the other hand, “the grandmother” remains too alive. The emphatic tone

of the line (“you lie alone”) and its formulation in the present simple offer rhetorical resistance to the conviction the statement is intended to express: the grandmother lies in general time (any time, repeatedly, or all the time); she is all too present and her lying, despite (or perhaps owing to?) her banishment “alone on the hill”, continues to haunt the living (the return of the repressed).

What can daughters make of what they are left by their mothers? Contrary to the poem’s assertion, the grandmother does not “lie alone”. The last lines of the poem suggest that the speaker, like her mother before her, cannot disclose everything to her daughter; thoughts and desires will get buried, or covered, like the imagery in the poem. The implication in the poem (that reads more and more like a muffled rejoinder to the dead) is that the glove box is a repository for knowledge that is not or cannot be spoken; knowledge that resists, and seeks, symbolization.

The description of the glovebox (“Soft-covered, padded, marked “Boudoir Long”) starts to resemble other kinds of boxes, also soft-covered, padded and marked: a book and a coffin, or: a book as a coffin.

The daughter will continue the process of burial begun by her mother. “To be human means above all to bury. [...] *humanitas* in Latin comes first and properly from *humando*, burying” (Merwin 63). Reading as burying, a process that is without end.

This is provisional separation.

Chapter Two

“Come not unto me for nothing can rescue me”

Faustus

Whatsoever tusk goeth my side
Whatsoever blood shall bleed, or rot
Canker the softest part of Venus rising,
For we were all young once and goddesses,
Whatsoever anything – come not unto me
Tho I cry through each cell of the prison,
Tho I walk the long arched corridor alone at night
Or sit and walk alone by day
With a grimace that children take to be a smile
So that they talk to me in the garden, on the beach
Under the striped awning, saying “I am five” –
Five – and the world before them, such a world
As even now entrances some of my senses. But
They are not permitted to come to me,
A wall stops them. You my love, with your world
And strong arms soon to help you hold your head on high,
You must remember my terrible tower
From which no-one can rescue me but my own jailer
With my own hands.
Whatsoever noise you hear from the throat of my despair,
Whatsoever anything at all,
Come not unto me, let me go in peace
For no-one and nothing now can rescue me.

– Ruth Miller, “Come Not Unto Me”

(How I hate them [biographical sketches] – they sound so barren and artificial!) (Ruth Miller, unpublished letter to Guy Butler, 22 May 1957)

In his introduction to Miller's collected poems, *Ruth Miller: Poems Prose Plays*, Abrahams offers a sketch of Miller's personality and life and gives the following account of his first meeting with Miller and her husband in Johannesburg:

I first met Ruth and Wolfe Miller in about 1959 when some writers, artists and academics were invited to a meeting in order to form a cultural circle, the Egoli Club [...] The Egoli club survived for only a few months, but after that meeting the Millers began inviting me to their home in Yeoville and a lasting friendship took root. (11)

The friendship lasted for "some ten years" (Miller died in 1969) with Miller the more senior partner in years (nine) and literary achievement at the time of her death.³⁵ Abrahams would receive recognition in later years not only for his own writing (poetry, short stories, a novel, literary criticism)³⁶ but also as an editor, publisher and champion of other writers, most notably the new black poets of the seventies.³⁷ He presents his friendship with Miller in terms of a vertical relation and casts her in the role of advisor or mentor; the implications of this structuring for his

³⁵ Miller was awarded the Ingrid Jonker Prize for Poetry for *Floating Island* (Cape Town: Human and Rousseau, 1965); her *Selected Poems* was published in the Phoenix Living Poets series (London: Chatto and Windus with the Hogarth Press, 1968).

³⁶ Abrahams published volumes of poetry, including: *Thresholds of Tolerance* (1975), *Journal of a New Man* (1984), *The Writer in the Sand* (1988), and *A Dead Tree Full of Live Birds* (1995); an autobiographical novel, *The Celibacy of Felix Greenspan* (1977); a selection of his other writing appears in *Lionel Abrahams: A Reader* (1988). He was the founder and editor of the literary journals *Purple Renoster* (1957) and *Sesame*, co-editor of the magazine *Quarry* and *South African Writing Today* (1987), and editor of the *Collected Works of Bosman* (1981). He was joint recipient with Siphosiphama of the 1976 Pringle Award and was awarded the Olive Schreiner Prize for Poetry in 1986.

³⁷ "After Oswald Mtshali's volume *Sounds of a Cowhide Drum* had been rejected by established publishers [...] as 'not up to standard,' Lionel Abrahams, the editor of [the literary journal] *The Purple Renoster*, printed the Mtshali poems and followed [them] (1970) with a first volume by Mongane Wally Serote, *Yakhal'inkomo* (1972)...Abrahams – a white literary figure – played a leading role in encouraging new black voices [...]" (Chapman, *South African Literatures* 333-334).

involvement in the representation and administration of Miller's literary legacy (as her editor and literary executor) will be explored below.

Earlier in the same introduction Abrahams attests to Miller's social and personal reticence, claiming that she "would have hated the kind of biographical delving that has been posthumously meted out to several of her South African literary contemporaries" (9). He admits that his "impulse to create a record of her being" might constitute an act of betrayal; "though," he adds in parentheses, "a limited betrayal, since, because of that reticence, I, who stood to her in the relation of literary protégé, am not in possession of privileged intimate knowledge" (10). Also, he concludes grimly, "in its relatedness to the art" his own "incomplete" telling of Miller's life story "represents something sufficiently unusual and of sufficient value to justify the pain I [he] may be inflicting on Ruth Miller's ghost" (10).

Whatever Miller's apparent antipathy towards biographical sketches, it remains a tenet of good literary research that biographical detail can be disregarded only once its relevance to the work has been assessed – something Abrahams half-concedes in a parenthetical remark in the same introduction:

(Sometimes, let us admit, such an implication may have some justice to it: a poem that has issued out of a peculiar circumstance may only reveal its creative force when extraneous information has provided a key to otherwise inaccessible meaning. But however fine the last result, this dependence implies defects in the aesthetic realisation of the poem.) (9)

J.M. Coetzee considers the value of "background information" to a reading of poetry in an essay on the German poet, Paul Celan. Referring to an argument made by the philosopher, Hans-Georg Gadamer, that "any receptive, open-minded reader with a German cultural background can understand what it is important to

understand in Celan without assistance, that background information should take second place to ‘what the poem [itself] knows’” Coetzee comments:

Gadamer’s argument is a brave but losing one. What he forgets is that we cannot be sure that the information that unlocks the poem [Celan’s Rosa Luxembourg poem] – in this case, the identities of the dead man and woman – is of secondary importance until we know what it is. Yet the questions Gadamer raises are important ones. Does poetry offer a kind of knowledge different from that offered by history, and demand a different kind of receptivity? Is it possible to respond to poetry like Celan’s, even to translate it, without fully understanding it? (Coetzee, “Losses” 4)

I will return to the question of what kind of knowledge poetry might offer later (“Poetry, it seems to me, is precisely the repository of knowledge about the resistance of language to intentional dissolution” (Johnson, *A World of Difference* 7)). In the meantime, it is worth acknowledging that background information, however banal or ultimately gratuitous it might appear, can strengthen a reading if only by forcing the reader to acknowledge the complex relations connecting a text to its source, which is not the same as forbidding “any reading that the author’s consciousness would not recognize” (Johnson, *Mother Tongues* 177). In this way, and as demonstrated by the passage from Coetzee quoted above, biographical information can be made to compete with other theories like “the knowledge of poetry” without thereby obliterating them. As Derek Attridge explains:

Historical and biographical research can suggestively enrich our sense of the writing process, as it occurred in a particular time and place, though it can never close down the text’s movement toward openness. (104)

The dearth of available background information on Miller (attributable in part to her “social and personal reticence” (10)) forces any purposeful reader of her work to delve in remote places in order to gain some insight into the material circumstances of her writing. I use the word “delve” advisedly: in Abrahams’s mixed

metaphor, “biographical delving” is “meted out” posthumously to writers who, like the speaker in Miller’s poem “Come Not Unto Me,” would presumably prefer to be “let go” and left “in peace.” His use of the word “delve” (its more archaic sense refers to the digging or turning up of earth) makes plain his view of the biographical enterprise as little more than an invasive, punitive digging up of dirt.

It is common for literary executors or estates to adopt a wary attitude to requests from biographers and researchers, to restrict severely public access to a writer’s personal material, and to guard a writer’s published work and correspondence closely. Abrahams (who in Metelerkamp’s experience was “neither self-aggrandising nor possessive” (“Ruth Miller and a Poetry of Loss” 26)) intervenes more indirectly on Miller’s behalf. The defensive, almost peremptory tone of his introduction to Miller’s collected work reflects the complex loyalties attendant on his position as Miller’s literary executor, friend, and fellow writer (or in his words, “literary protégé”)³⁸ and also signals his awareness of, and participation in, the debates (most spectacularly, the Sachs cultural debate) informing and redefining the cultural landscape in South Africa around the time of the book’s publication.³⁹

While Abrahams’s intention in finding a publisher for Miller’s collected work, and in writing the book’s introduction, is, clearly, to preserve Miller’s oeuvre for future readers, it is apparent that he has an equal interest in preserving Miller’s literary “standards and attitudes” (9) (which seem to overlap significantly with his own) from the incursions of new readings (or what he refers to elsewhere as “perverse fashionable interpretation” (Unpublished correspondence with Miller’s daughter, Pat

³⁸Miller’s *Selected Poems* (1968) is dedicated to Lionel Abrahams.

³⁹ Four years after the book’s publication, in a letter to Miller’s daughter, Pat Campbell, Abrahams refers to an ongoing “emphasis on purging ‘Euro-centrism’” from the South African academy (08.01.1994).

Campbell, 3 July 1991)) in a changing cultural climate. Abrahams appears to want to establish some kind of reading protocol, under Miller's authority, for readers of Miller's work to follow. Like all protocols (and as some of Abrahams's remarks in his correspondence with Campbell suggest) his is designed with protection in mind, in this case, of Miller's corpus (as he sees it), against the unwelcome attention of those readers whose "preoccupation with radical revolutionary (and feminist) politics" gives their "attention some bizarre twists" (16 August 1989). In other words, Abrahams wants to impose some limits on what can be done with, or to, Miller's text, because he knows what every writer and reader intuits about textuality on some level, without necessarily being able, or inclined, to articulate it:

the identity of the poem is not secure, walled-up in itself, but open to its outside and open to history, sustained only by a certain cultural vigilance or even violence. (Attridge 66)

"Word," as Miller puts it, "is flesh" ("There Are Wounds" 63). Whatever else this image implies, it is a vivid reminder of the exposedness, vulnerability, and materiality of language (with poetry as its most visible instance) and a powerful argument against letting the work speak for itself, or stand on its own, for any literary executor, even one of Abrahams's reputedly generous disposition. With this in mind, Abrahams is at pains to let the reader know that his provision of some background information on Miller in his introduction to her collected writing is not meant to tantalise or condone the reader's taste (it "is not offered as bait or explanation" (10)), but to put to rest, authoritatively and for once and for all, the suggestion that "privileged intimate knowledge" of Miller's life could, or should enrich a reading of her poetry. His willingness to risk something like brutality (to inflict some pain on Miller's ghost) in his personal recollections of her suggests that he cherishes no illusions about the insensitive nature of the forces he is trying to counteract, or dissuade:

For me there was always a certain surprising contrast between Ruth Miller as one knew her personally and Ruth Miller as she was expressed in her work. Her conversation came under the pressure of her anxieties and distresses, her sometimes eccentric or dogmatic judgements, her habit of riding tangents long after they had lost their modicum of interest – and thus it displayed little of the wit, economy, elegance, perceptiveness, sensitivity and sheer cleverness that characterised much of her poetry. The contrast constituted a phenomenon one has to ponder. Where did such penetratingly articulate poetry spring from? For all its intellectual strengths, it certainly did not originate in her conscious head. (12)⁴⁰

Byron Rogers, biographer of the Welsh poet, R.S. Thomas, is no doubt correct to express the attitudes of poets and their literary executors' to biography in the imperative: "The life and the poems, like fissile material, must be kept apart" (19).

Abrahams's aversion to mixing Miller's life with her poetry carries with it an intimation of the cautionary tale.

In addition to outlining a reading protocol in his introduction to *Ruth Miller: Poems Prose Plays*, Abrahams, in his role as editor, was charged with the task of selecting material for publication in the collected volume from her uncollected poetry.

He explains how he came into possession of the unpublished material:

A number of the Uncollected Poems constituting the third section of this volume have not previously appeared in anthologies or journals. Almost all of them, however, came to me in the form of typescripts, many of them certainly the poet's own. Most of these had for a while been in the care of Mr Charles Eglington, who had evidently begun to

⁴⁰In Abrahams's tribute to Ruth Miller published in *Jewish Affairs* he makes a similar observation, but with a slightly different emphasis: "Beyond the attractive aspects of her outward character – warmth, frankness, humour – was a region of brambles and sand that had to be crossed before one could come to know and love the obscured but fine and vital spirit that was her essential nature, in which lay hidden the source of her poems with their order, persuasive force, delicate shared awareness, proportion and compressed richness. Even some of the qualities that could make her company prickly rather than soothing were related to the essential strength and fineness of her spirit. She was intolerant – of pomposity, falseness, sloppy standards; she was emphatically assertive – with the thrust of utterly honest opinion about good and bad as she saw them; she was impatient as a listener – being goaded by the lively urgency of an extraordinarily active, rather than disciplined mind" (15).

make a selection.⁴¹ After his death they were retrieved by Ruth Miller's daughter, Mrs Pat Campbell, who left them in my charge when she emigrated to Australia. (5)

He justifies his admittedly subjective decision⁴² to publish "perhaps half of the available uncollected material [55 poems]" by declaring his custodial obligation to inform a new generation of readers about "one of our finest poets [...] by means of her valid achievements – her poems that is to say, and not holus-bolus her texts" (17). Sensing, possibly, that his own authority is insufficiently persuasive in this instance, he invokes his memories of Miller's "strictness in suppressing passages that were not essential to the life of a poem, and, indeed, in censoring whole poems that did not meet her standard" to bolster what might be perceived as his "recalcitrant stance" on the matter (17).

The difficulty here of course, and one that Metelerkamp is quick to point out in her master's thesis (25–26), is that Abrahams's ignorance of Miller's wishes might argue more strongly for the inclusion of all the unpublished material (even as a group of "seconds") in one volume than for the exclusion of only some of them.⁴³ Abrahams's assurances that the rejected texts ("of no great quantity") will be preserved in an archive and made accessible for study by specialists serves to institutionalise their status as unselected, rather than uncollected, material and draws attention to his desire to decide what will come to constitute Miller's valid

⁴¹Abrahams received the rest of the typescripts at a much later stage from Miller's close friend, Queenie Berman. Abrahams gives no indication whether his taste and judgement in selecting material for publication overlapped significantly with Eglington's.

⁴² He states quite candidly that his decision was not informed by economic concerns "since the eliminated matter is of no great quantity" (17).

⁴³In his review of *Ruth Miller: Poems, Prose, Plays* Nick Mehuizen reaches a similar conclusion: "Abrahams admits to going by his own 'taste and judgement' in making this selection, and defends his position by referring to Miller's uncompromising fastidiousness regarding her work. Nevertheless, it is unfortunate that the present opportunity to centralise Miller's poetic writings should not have been used to full advantage" (5).

achievements, or the Miller canon, and what will be treated as apocryphal, for future readers.

As indicated in Chapter One, the critical debate over the content of Miller's literary legacy made its passage through South African English academic discourse over a period of about seven years (1985–1992), in which time the volume of Miller's collected writing, with Abrahams's introduction, was published eventually by Carrefour Press (1990), and Chapman and Metelerkamp's articles were published in local literary journals (in 1990 and 1992 respectively). At the same time, another dispute over Miller's legacy, this time of a more private nature, played itself out. It is unlikely that Abrahams drew any parallels with his impulse to authorise certain readings of Ruth Miller's work and Pat Campbell's to decide what constituted her mother's "true" biography; to a reader studying both Abrahams's introduction and the correspondence between Abrahams and Campbell, the impulse looks remarkably similar.

The correspondence Abrahams entered into with Campbell in the mid-eighties over his intention to publish a volume of her mother's collected work (including poetry, two radio plays and a short semi-autobiographical story about her childhood) is now stored as part of the Abrahams Collection in the National English Literary Museum in Grahamstown. Although the earliest dated letter in the correspondence (15 April 1985) is from Campbell to Abrahams, we can infer from remarks made in her letter that he initiated the communication: "You are right in assuming that you could 'go ahead' and do whatever, with my mother's poems" (15 April 1995). There is no accession record of his letters before 17 May 1989.

Besides the testimony of the letters, there is little available or easily verifiable biographical information on Pat Campbell. She is the daughter of Ruth (née

Friedjohn) and Wolfe Miller (married in 1940) and was one of two children – her younger brother, David, died by electrocution at the age of fourteen at home. Campbell left South Africa for Australia in December 1976 with her husband, Clive, and twin boys, Alan and Robert. Her father, Wolfe Miller had remarried in 1970, a year after Ruth Miller's death and, according to Campbell, became estranged from her and "everyone from his past life [...]. I left South Africa not even knowing where he lived" (Unpublished correspondence, 15 April, 1985). On the evidence of the correspondence, Campbell changed address several times in Australia, leading an increasingly restless and itinerant existence after her marriage broke down and one of her sons, Alan, went missing. Her side of the correspondence to Abrahams concludes on 4 March 1994.

My intention in turning to the correspondence between Abrahams and Campbell, and in providing some background information on their relation to each other and to Miller, is to suggest an approach to the topic of literary maternity that includes a consideration of Miller's literary legacy and the issues of continuity and authority that arise in the context of literary publication. The comparison I am drawing between Campbell and Abrahams derives from the structural similarity of their positions in relation to Miller (daughter/mother; protégé/mentor) and the intersection of familial and institutional interests indicated by the administration (and preservation⁴⁴) of Miller's literary legacy. The correspondence entered into by Campbell and Abrahams over the publication of Miller's work allows me to monitor the transfer of the relation mother/child from the context of a particular relationship (Miller and Campbell) to the more discursive setting of legacy administration, and to

⁴⁴ As Abrahams comments in his introduction: "The intention of this volume is to save all the works that clearly testify to Ruth Miller's superlative gift" (16).

recast an interest in an empirical author (Ruth Miller) as an interest in the activities of a reader (prototypically Campbell or Abrahams) in relation to a body of work.

It is not my argument that the positions occupied by Campbell and Abrahams are empirically, or even structurally, identical; what I am suggesting is that their negotiation of the issues of continuity and authority from the interested positions of daughter and literary protégé-executor in the correspondence (and with reference to Miller's literary legacy) may point to what is at stake in other readings of Miller's poetry, and the significance of the poetry for the topic of literary maternity in general. Not every reader reads the poetry as Miller's child or literary heir but the critical consensus on both the "singularity"⁴⁵ of Miller's achievement as a poet, and her suitability as a "remarkable model"⁴⁶ for other South African poets writing in English, suggests that the impulse towards identification with Miller as a literary precursor may be one of the more conspicuous and complex effects of her poetry on its readers. The enthusiasm displayed by Miller's critics in recognising the authority of her writing is matched only by their reservations over its content (specifically the sense of isolation and loss they detect in her poetry)⁴⁷ and, I would argue, the implications of this content for the perpetuation of her literary legacy. Comparing the ambivalence of the critical response to the content of Miller's poetry with certain of the remarks made by Campbell and Abrahams in the course of their correspondence

⁴⁵ "In many ways Ruth Miller is one of the most singular poets South Africa has produced – I mean singular in the sense "alone: away from others" [...] With much to expect from her in the future, it would not be rash to predict that she is likely to become an influential and important innovator in English South African poetry" (Eglington 31).

⁴⁶ "Miller occupies a central position in South African poetry [...] The writers of COSAW [The Congress of South African Writers], in many cases engaged in developing their own criteria regarding aesthetic standards, will, I think, also find in Miller a most remarkable model" (Meihuizen 7).

⁴⁷ For instance, Metelerkamp laments Miller's blindness to "her own poetic achievements and to the comfort that human history might offer in an imperfect world" (Bason and Conolly 1025–26).

indicates a more specific itinerary for that ambivalence and its relation to the question of Miller's literary maternity.

In the excerpts from the correspondence reproduced below, Campbell and Abrahams exchange remarks over the critical reception of Miller's book and the reviews Abrahams sent Campbell in Australia, referring specifically to Miller's poem, "Come Not Unto Me". My reading of the correspondence and the poem emphasises their inter-implication and shared status as texts, and attempts to show how the reader's ambivalent relation to the poem is present in the poem itself and constitutive of the poem's status as a particular kind of language event.

On 6 August 1991, Campbell writes:

Thanks for the reviews, mostly good [...]. It is interesting to see the interpretations the critics give to her work, sometimes quite inaccurately, I feel. They seem to be trying, without success to make her a "feminist poet" or a political poet and I agree with Margaret Daymond – that it has a "degree of beauty – for its own sake." [...] In "Come not unto me" and "Snow" they seem to think the "you" referred to is a lover, however, they are both poems to David [Miller's son].

Campbell adds in a postscript, "I am not criticising the reviews – the poems are open to many interpretations and I don't think it is really important if people see different things in them."

In his letter of 19 August 1991, Abrahams responds:

Some of the critics are funny, aren't they, with their odd readings? Glad you responded best to Margaret Daymond.
I have to tell you, I always thought "Come Not Unto Me" was addressed to you. I still do.

Campbell replies:

When I read your comment about the poem "Come not unto me" being addressed to me, I read it several times and could see why you think so. But it has me mystified because I can see it was not David, as it was written in the present, and he had already died. My mother's inscription in the front of "Selected Poems" (my copy) merely says "To

Pat – Fond Love – Mom” – which was rather terse considering her eloquence. Perhaps there is an unknown “other”? (4 December 1991).

The deliberation over the intended addressee of Miller’s poem, “Come Not Unto Me,” in the above excerpts could be used to inform a broader discussion on the problem of authorial intention and the limits of interpretation in literature in general. The point that such a discussion might miss, and which Campbell and Abrahams treat as self-evident, is why the issue of address should be of such special interest to readers of this poem in the first place. All poems, implicitly or explicitly, have addressees, textually inscribed interlocutors “willed into existence” through the act of writing. The argument that the I-you structure of address in Miller’s poem makes inevitable an interest in the speaker’s interlocutor fails to uncover the possible relation between that interest and the desire of readers to gain access to the text on their own terms; that is, how a preoccupation with identifying the poem’s actual addressee might be motivated equally by the wish not to be identified as the addressee oneself. Which leads me to ask: what is the nature of the reader’s wish to be independent of the poem’s addressee, and does it differ according to different poems? For instance, what specifically about this poem (its diction, register and structure) makes the question of the reader’s implication in the text so compelling and seemingly impatient of an answer?

Campbell’s response to the suggestion that she is the proper addressee of the poem could be instructive in this regard. First, she concedes the immanence of Abrahams’s interpretation (“I read it [the poem] several times and could see why you think so”); then she confirms the inappropriateness of her brother’s nomination (“I can see it was not David”) offering the specious argument that he was “already dead” (why can a dead person not be the addressee of a poem?); finally, she disputes her own nomination indirectly by making reference to the inscription. The

inconclusive remark that follows (“Perhaps there is an unknown ‘other’?”) precisely does not follow; the reader of the correspondence infers that Campbell has demonstrated the inappropriateness of her nomination as addressee of the poem without being able to state with any confidence the substance of her argument. Like the inscription she cites, Campbell’s response is marked by suggestive gaps, elisions that the reader is expected to “fill in” or discount in order to testify to the obviousness of her conclusion. The reader who does not follow Campbell’s reasoning, and who refuses to articulate the steps of her argument (What is the relation between the inscription and the poem’s addressee? How does its “terseness” corroborate Campbell’s interpretation?) is made aware also of the obtuseness of her demurral: it does not amount to a direct repudiation of Abrahams’s suggestion at any point.

Campbell’s inability or disinclination to formulate a conclusive response to Abrahams does not, however, undermine entirely the force of her argument. To treat her resistance to Abrahams’s suggestion as a case of Freudian negation would be inadequate⁴⁸ if the complexity of Campbell’s position were to be shown to derive from the particular contours of that resistance. The statement that it is her wish not to be identified as the addressee of the poem needs to be refined if it is to reflect what I consider to be the special emphasis of her response: Campbell comments that she can see why Abrahams thinks she is the addressee (in the course of the exchange she remarks that she doesn’t “think it is really important if people see different things in them [the poems]”) but she is determined to establish that his interpretation has never occurred to her and that she remains “mystified” by the question of the poem’s

⁴⁸ The process whereby the analysand’s resistance to a particular interpretation given by the analyst serves to confirm the accuracy of that interpretation. “[N]egation has an indicative value for Freud, signalling as it does the moment when an unconscious idea or wish begins to re-emerge, whether during the course of treatment or outside it” (Laplanche and Pontalis 263).

addressee. In other words, Campbell seems to want to establish that *she* does not identify with the addressee of the poem. This modified negation can be seen as ambivalence, an interest in partially authorising the interpretation offered by Abrahams while simultaneously reserving the right to withhold unconditional authorisation from the privileged position as daughter-reader of the mother-text.

Campbell's attempt to set herself apart from Abrahams and to lay claim to a special relation to Miller's text is presented as the prerogative of the daughter who is situated outside textual effects. Her resolute indifference to the poem's address (she indicates to Abrahams that she has read it "several times") culminates in idle speculation over "an unknown 'other'" that has the effect of returning the discussion to its point of departure with the implication that "they" (the other, unnamed readers) could be right after all: "In "Come not unto me" and "Snow" they seem to think the "you" referred to is a lover [...]." The reader is given to understand that by virtue of her position as daughter, Campbell possesses comprehensive knowledge of her mother (at one point in the correspondence she tells Abrahams: "I could go on and on – if you had wanted information – I have it all" (9 November 1990)) and that she will decide the extent of her implication in Miller's writing. It is as though the intimacy of the mother/daughter relation authorises Campbell to repeat the prohibition of the poem's title in a different context: "Come Not Unto Me" is recast as her reply to readers (notably Abrahams) who would invite her to implicate herself in their readings of Miller's poetry and thereby arrogate to themselves a degree of meta-textual authority.

The struggle over authority between Campbell and Abrahams in the correspondence (who gets to speak for Ruth Miller as mother and literary precursor) and Campbell's own drama of separation from her mother's poem (who Miller is

speaking for/to) provides a context for my interpretation of the ambivalent response of readers to the poem (their wish both to gain access to the text, or what could be called the knowledge of the text, through interpretation, and to be seen to be independent of the poem's address that is, to interpret the poem on their own terms): the first, formative separation of the child from its mother. The ideal of complete separation (or non-implication in the context of my reading of Miller's poem), what Johnson describes as the "wishful anticipation of a free, self-identical needlessness [...] that in fact can be achieved only in death," has its prototype in the inevitable dissolution of the preoedipal bond (*World* 143). The depiction of this primary separation in developmental schemes that measure maturity in terms of distance from the mother suggests not only that complete separation is desirable, but also that it is an achievable state.⁴⁹

It is tempting to interpret any resistance on the reader's part to nomination as the poem's addressee exclusively in terms of the normative ideal of complete separation. According to this ideal, readers resist implication in the poem in order to secure their absolute, because achievable, autonomy from the text (and not, as will be suggested later in this chapter, as part of a strategy to contain the ambivalence of the relations structured by the poem). This approach does not recognise the ambivalence of their response or, in terms of the comparison I am drawing, the fact that Campbell does not appear to be able to (or want to) repudiate unequivocally Abrahams's interpretation of the poem. In other words, the normative prescription of complete separation as the terminus for psychic maturity presents what I am arguing is a resistance to the inescapable ambivalence of the ideal of separation in terms of

⁴⁹"It is as if the adult subject has no relation to dependency, no relation to the mother, which reinforces the notion that, as that from which the adult subject must be completely separate, mothers can be defined only in terms of their ability to satisfy someone else's needs" (Johnson, *Mother Tongues* 86).

a natural resistance to the maternal desire for dependency and control. Johnson's review of the complexity of the mother's position in the process of separation as depicted in normative developmental schemes should give some indication of what is at stake in my discussion of the poem's address:

The mother can even be blamed for the damage caused by her own failure to force the child to separate from her. This puts her in a bind from which she cannot extricate herself: she must optimally respond to the child and then optimally assure the frustration that enables him to separate. But she can't oversee that separation herself, otherwise the child will only say, "My mother won't allow me to separate." [...] The mother *cannot* give permission to the child to separate. This would be a form of the classic double bind: "Disobey me." Separation can occur only when the child risks becoming independent of what the mother allows or prohibits. (*Mother Tongues* 86)

The title, epigraph, and refrain of Miller's poem could also be read as a form of that double bind. In terms of my comparison between the reader and the daughter and with reference to the above passage, the text cannot give permission to the reader to resist identification with its addressee ("Come Not Unto Me" as "Do not heed my call") without first installing the reader as addressee and then implying that wanting to be addressed (and then the impulse towards resistance) is immanent in the act of reading the poem. If the reader's independence derives from her position outside the text, her putative externality, this position is compromised when it appears to be assumed in accordance with the wishes of the poem. Like the mother who grants her child permission to separate, the poem appears to oversee the terms of its own critique; the location of the reader outside the text is indicated in the poem and her initiative towards independence is effectively thwarted.

The reader's reservations over occupying the position of the poem's "You" resonate with the child's anxiety that her position is determined not by her needs but by the powerful desire of the mother. As Johnson asks, "What if, in the child's mind, it is the *mother*, finally, who is the solipsist, and the child just an image that she

created?" (*Mother Tongues* 92). In other words, what if, in the child's mind, it is not the case that the mother exists in order to satisfy the child's needs, but that the child has no existence outside that of the mother? If the only knowledge that can be inferred from the mother's relation to the child pertains to the existence and workings of the mother's own consciousness,⁵⁰ it follows that the function of the reader as child in relation to the poem, is like that of a textual device: to create an illusion of separation from the text that is otherwise irrelevant. The reader, in this scenario, is forced to confront the possibility that her hard-won independence, or externality, could be enlisted in the services of an authorial (maternal) consciousness that recognises every critical approach as yet another instance of self-representation.

Johnson's speculation on maternal solipsism as a feature of the fantasy life of the child complicates the position of the child-reader explained above. Her enquiry is directed at the contents of the *child's mind*, with the implication that the child attributes solipsism, finally, to the mother, through a process of identification; that is, that the child conceives of the mother in terms of the solipsistic fantasies that constitute (at least initially) her own relation to the external world (prototypically the mother's body). The treatment of the child's fantasy of maternal solipsism as an instance of identification underscores the ambivalence of the child/mother relation through its consideration of the contradictory nature of that fantasy (and fantasy in general), how it functions both to reject aggressively the child's desire for fusion and to defend against, or defer, complete separation from the mother. According to this reading, the reader's anxiety over her status in relation to the text (her fantasy of

⁵⁰ Solipsism is not a psychoanalytic term, although it is absorbed occasionally by definitions of narcissism: "Correctly, [solipsism is the] philosophical theory that only the self is knowable or that the apparent external world consists of our own thoughts. Sometimes used, notably by Suttie (1935), to describe what classical theory calls the narcissism of the infant, i.e. the assumption that the external world exists solely to satisfy its wishes and its failure to appreciate that its objects are persons with *their* wishes and needs" (Rycroft 172–173).

“maternal solipsism”) is not simply a result of her concern over the claims of a particular authorial consciousness, but is also a denial of her own inescapably ambivalent relation to the text (how is the boundary between mother and child decided ultimately?) and what this relation implies for the act of interpretation (as one possible manifestation of symbolic capacity).

The suggestion that ambivalence is not localised in the figure of the mother or the child but in the relation that must be symbolised in order that the subjectivity of the child is constituted, draws on Melanie Klein’s theory of object relations. Klein’s theory presents the subject’s movement towards psychic maturity in terms of her ability to tolerate gradually, not resolve, the ambivalence that is a feature of the object relation from the start:

For her [Klein], the instinct is ambivalent from the start: “love” for the object is inseparable from its destruction, so that ambivalence becomes a quality of the object itself. As such an ambivalent object, perfectly benevolent and fundamentally hostile at one and the same time, would be intolerable, the subject struggles against his predicament by splitting it into a “good” and a “bad” object. (Laplanche and Pontalis 27)

Kleinian psychoanalysis foregrounds the dialectic of the introjection/projection of “good” and “bad” objects, and argues that it is this dialectic that constitutes the child’s relation to the external world (the mother’s body in an extended sense), her division of inside and outside, and her own subjectivity.⁵¹ The child’s construction and deconstruction of boundaries (through the introjection/projection of objects that are themselves a product of her relations with them) are grounded in her relation to the mother’s body and driven by anxiety:

⁵¹ In their brief overview of the debate between different schools of psychoanalytic thought on the issue of projection and introjection (“whether the operation of projection and introjection *presupposes* the differentiation between internal and external or whether it *constitutes* it”), Laplanche and Pontalis cite Anna Freud’s opposition to Klein: “...we might suppose that projection and introjection were methods which depended on the differentiation of the ego from the outside world” (353).

Anxiety sets going the mechanism of identification (with the persecutory penis, vagina, and breast [the imagined contents of the mother's body]), and at the same time fuels the symbolic process – the ever mobile symbolic equations or displaced identifications which Klein views in the light of defenses [...]. Providing the basis for phantasy, Klein's symbolic equations also provide the basis for subsequent relations to, and mastery of, reality. (Jacobus 131–132)

Or, in Klein's words:

Since the child desires to destroy the organs (penis, vagina, breast) which stand for the objects, he conceives a dread of the latter. This anxiety contributes to make him equate the organs in question with other things; owing to this equation these in their turn become objects of anxiety, and so he is impelled constantly to make other and new equations, which form the basis of his interest in the new objects and of symbolism. (Mitchell 97)

Symbolisation, as a pretext for, or defence against, persecutory fantasies, emerges from the child's ambivalent relation to the mother's body, the close connection between introjection and incorporation of objects during the oral phase, and the child's transformation (through splitting) of the always retrospective loss of the maternal object (the ideal of perfect union) into the "bad" object of fantasy that must be devoured or expelled.⁵²

The fantasy – by representing not reality, but the duo of "drive *and* internal object" and "sensation/affect *and* object," and by anticipating the future while overestimating the threats that future poses – transforms *deprivation* into *frustration*. From that point on, a degree of negativity informs the fantasy-like activity, one that goes through several stages before it accesses the capacity to symbolize through language and thought. (Kristeva, *Klein* 142)

In other words: "Kleinian negativity, which [...] guides the drive to intelligence by way of the fantasy, chooses the mother as its target: in order to think, one must first lose the mother" (Kristeva, *Klein* 130).

The significance of the Kleinian emphasis on ambivalence and fantasy for the topic of mother/child separation is to make explicit both the discursive character of

⁵² "What is lost is a persecutor; the only way of being of the object is as something devoured or expelled; the lost object is bad because the only way of being the object is as something devoured or expelled" (Rose, *Why War?*164).

such separation with regard to psychic life, and the association between loss of the mother, or the more aggressive matricide,⁵³ and the capacity for symbolisation. The version of Klein's theory of the origin of symbols that states that we have symbols because the mother is insufficient, because she cannot fulfil the child's emotional needs, should be qualified always by reference to the Kleinian notions of fantasy ("No reality situation can fulfil the often contradictory urges and wishes of the child's fantasy life") and "psychic reality":

Because of the protopresence of the fantasy and this protopresence of the ego, the destiny of the drive is not circumscribed by the conditions of an external reality [...] with regard to psychic life, fantastical fear and anxiety have a greater impact than does the *real* separation between mother and child, regardless of whether such separation is enduring, dramatic, or neither of the two. (Kristeva, *Klein* 142)

What is of immediate import in Klein's theory of symbolisation is her claim that separation from the mother as a feature of psychic reality is a necessary precondition for the psychic freedom of the subject and for the emergence of her symbolic capacity, and that the "uncertain miracle [of symbolisation]" depends on the mother, "as long as 'I' [the child] can get beyond her" (Kristeva, *Klein* 135). In other words, Klein presents the child's entry into symbolisation as an achievement that is won both *with* the mother and, in a certain sense, *against* her.⁵⁴ Her attribution of a dual role to the mother in the process of separation and, consequently, symbolisation, touches on the mother's fundamental role in language learning:

⁵³ As Kristeva comments: "In fantasy life, of course, separation or loss is tantamount to *death*. Paradoxically [...] *the cult of the mother is, in Klein's view, a pretext for matricide*" (Klein, her emphasis, 130).

⁵⁴ In her discussion of the significance of the Medusa's head as an image of the loss of the archaic mother in the history of Western art, Kristeva writes: "The 'beheading' of the mother, understood both as a 'putting to death' and a 'flight' to be taken both with the mother and against her – is a necessary precondition for the psychic freedom of the subject: that is what Klein had the courage to proclaim, in her own way and without equivocation" (*Klein* 131).

A child comes into language through the mother's address. It is her job to transform a little animal into a little human being. The fact that she does this by teaching the child to speak indicates that, however dependent on her the child may be in fact, her most important lesson will be to turn "into signifying form" everything that unites them. (Johnson, *Mother Tongues* 66)

By inserting a consideration of symbolisation or language (and the unconscious) into the common depiction of maternity as the site of exclusively non-verbal, bodily closeness, Klein and Johnson reorient (albeit from different directions) theoretical interest in the ambivalence of the mother/child relation, and the implications of this ambivalence for a fantasy of separation that "kills," around the position of the mother as subject of the discourse on separation. In other words, the complexity of the mother's position (where she speaks from and what she knows, as opposed to what the child thinks the mother knows) has the effect of throwing into doubt the nature of the mother's relation to the child and her role in their separation. Jessica Benjamin alludes to this complexity in her critique of the tendency in psychoanalysis to depict the mother in terms of a regressive force threatening the autonomy of her child:

Real mothers in our culture, for better and worse, devote most of their energy to fostering independence. It is usually they who inculcate the social and moral values that make up the content of the young child's superego. And it is usually they who set a limit to the erotic bond with the child, and thus to the child's aspiration for omnipotent control and dread of engulfment. (152)

Klein's well-documented indifference to the "real mother"⁵⁵ and foregrounding of the impact of fantasy on object relations should not rule out a consideration of how the mother's unconscious is implicated in the fantasy world posited and modified by the child. The ambivalence of the transactions that take place between the mother and child, transactions that are based on the proximity of their bodies and mutual

⁵⁵ "For Klein, there is no 'real mother,' or she counts for very little, because the only mother who interests her is the mother who can be thought" (Kristeva, *Klein* 238).

stimulation of their senses (through nursing, cleaning, soothing and play), is not exhausted by a more inclusive definition of maternal ambivalence or through the determined recuperation of the mother's "voice." In this regard, Jean Laplanche's work on what he calls "the enigmatic signifier" – opaque sexual messages transmitted but not understood by the parents (prototypically the nursing mother⁵⁶) to the child, through gesture, smell, tone and so on – serves as a reminder of the mother's own self-difference, and desire:

To address someone with no shared interpretative system, in a mainly extra-verbal manner; such is the function of adult messages, of those signifiers which I claim are simultaneously and indissociably enigmatic and sexual, in so far as they are not transparent to themselves, but comprised by the adult's relation to their own unconscious, by unconscious sexual fantasies set in motion by his relation to the child. (Phillips, *Promises* 202)

Laplanche's restoration of the otherness of the unconscious (and not just in the form of the child's fantasy) and maternal desire to the earliest interaction between mother and child is relevant here for two reasons: it locates ambivalence in the *relation* between the mother and the child; and it points up the difference between the decentred mother (the thinking mother) and the maternal ideal or phallic mother (the mother who is thought) by placing a limit on the mother's knowledge and self-knowledge. Laplanche's work shows that speaking on behalf of maternal ambivalence, no matter what our intentions, "is not the same thing as trying to address what the unconscious does to any position from which we might speak" (Rose, *On Not Being Able to Sleep* 157). In terms of my reading of Miller's poetry and the topic of literary maternity, Laplanche's emphasis on the otherness of the unconscious guards against the confusion of Miller's biography with her poetry, or

⁵⁶ "[...] for Laplanche it is, as one might suspect, the child at the mother's breast that is the source, or exemplary scene for this tragic-comedy of mutual confounding that makes us who we are" (Phillips, *Promises* 202-203).

against an over-valuation of her knowledge and self-identity as mother-poet of her text.

The connection between maternity and symbolic capacity lends support to the assertion that complete separation from the mother (as prototypical other) is at best, an enabling illusion (while Klein's emphasis on the impact of fantastical fear and anxiety treats the real separation from the mother as largely irrelevant) and endorses Johnson's implicit challenge to Freudian psychoanalysis that "pre-oedipal structures [...] be recognized as permanent and pervasive rather than simply regressive" (Johnson, *World* 142).

As we give greater value to the preoedipal world, to a more flexible acceptance of difference, we can see that difference is only truly established when it exists in tension with likeness, when we are able to recognize the other in ourselves. True differentiation sustains the balance between separateness and connection in a dynamic tension. (Benjamin 169)

This "tension" is sustained through Klein's use of the term "position" (namely, the paranoid-schizoid and depressive positions) in her description of the psychic reality of the infant in place of the more Anna Freudian "stage":

In place of the emphasis on libidinal stages – oral, anal, phallic, genital – deployed by Anna Freud and other analysts, Melanie Klein introduces a concept that presents the moment of ego organization – she substitutes a structural for a developmental notion. This facilitates the making of a connection between adult psychosis and infant development – a "position" is an always available state, not something one passes through. (Mitchell 116)

What was previously referred to as Campbell's own drama of separation from Miller's text is cast in the poem as an ongoing series of ambivalent instances of separation between the reader (as a possible effect of the text) and the text (as the context for the structuring of an ambivalent relation). In this sense, "Come Not Unto Me" represents a struggle over the ideal of the reader's textual authority and self-

identity and the ethics or limits of interpretation (what she can legitimately do with the text, how this is decided and to whom the text belongs)⁵⁷ where the symbolic traffic between the reader and the text is modelled on the ambivalent transactions that structure the preoedipal relation mother/daughter.

Although my analysis is not directly concerned with describing the creative process of the writer through the persona of the child or the mother, my exploration of the set of textual transactions that structure the relation between reader and poem along the lines of the preoedipal mother and child is ultimately a study of the relation between maternity and textuality. In her essay "Writing and Motherhood" Susan Rubin Suleiman takes issue with the idea of the text as maternal body, an idea she nonetheless describes as "extremely suggestive," finding it to be incompatible with her stated interest in the mother who *writes* as opposed to the mother who is *written*. She argues that psychoanalytic theories on writing and artistic creation in general present creativity exclusively as the "child's drama": "[P]sychoanalytic theory invariably places the artist, man or woman, in the position of the child. Just as motherhood is ultimately the child's drama, so is artistic creation" (357). In response to those theories that place the mother's body at the centre of creativity (specifically the work of Melanie Klein and Roland Barthes) she asks:

And yet...what about the writer who *is* "the body of the mother?" Is this a foolish question, since mothers too have mothers? Does the mother who writes write exclusively as her own mother's child?"
Perhaps. (358)

Suleiman's inconclusive but considered answer (she reserves the answer for the beginning of the next paragraph, forcing the reader to pause) resists the either/or logic of polemical discussion and points the way for a style of critical reading that is

⁵⁷ Taken from Adam Phillips's essay on translation, quoted in the previous chapter: "[F]rom a psychoanalytic point of view there will always be a question about what the translator feels internally permitted to make of what he is given, to make of his chosen text" (*Promises* 137–138).

unembarrassed by its own moments of “incomplete separation”: in other words, Suleiman shows that asking questions about the mother who writes does not preclude all interest in the relation between the mother and the child where the designations “mother” and “child” (the mother in relation to her child; the mother as the child in relation to her mother) are not unambiguous. If Suleiman appears to be impatient with the psychoanalytic tendency to cast creativity as the “child’s drama,” she is also unwilling to “let go” of the suggestive links that can be discovered between psychoanalytic theories of the maternal body and the direction of her own questions on maternity and writing.⁵⁸

My reading of Miller’s poem draws on the scrupulous indecision of Suleiman’s example, but the focus is different: although there is equal interest in the mother as the subject of discourse, Suleiman limits herself in this essay to a largely thematic discussion of the relation mother-writer/text, finding in the fictions of mother-writers traces of the maternal violence, guilt and ambivalence that are overlooked too often in accounts of the creative process predicated on the notion of the artist as child.

In addition, she studies fictional prose only, offering readings of a short story and a novel. Lyric poetry, unlike narrative prose, does not concern itself with plot and the passing of time. It is not my contention that Miller’s poem tells the story of a mother and her daughter, or that Miller is writing about her particular relationship with Pat Campbell; her poem structures a relation between the text and its readers that is

⁵⁸ The tension I sense in Suleiman’s writing on psychoanalysis (between rejection and retention) could be likened to the tension between denial and affirmation that Benjamin associates with the games of toddlers: “Perhaps this tension between denial and affirmation is another of the many meanings of that favorite toddler game ‘Peekabo’ or of Freud’s observations of the toddler making the spool disappear and reappear (the famous ‘*fort-da*’ or gone-there game)” (39). This comparison resonates with Kristeva’s thesis that the material rejections of the infant in the imaginary set up the possibility of symbolic rejection, negation, and separation later on.

situated in the perpetual present⁵⁹ and that activates the ambivalent relation between the preoedipal mother and child – an ambivalence that is suggested in the poem through the use of reference (the poem’s epigraph) and allusion, metaphor, verbal effects (such as alliteration, sibilance and guttural dissonance that have a mimetic as well as descriptive function) and the complexity of the poem’s address.

Whether the addressee of Miller’s poem is taken to be her daughter, her son, or an “unknown other,” it is my argument, in the reading that follows, that the ambivalent transactions between the text and the reader mobilised in the poem through its mixed register and other formal distortions, appears to produce in its readers a desire to engage with the issue of the poem’s address. If the question of the poem’s address persists as a rhetorical device in my analysis, it is because the nature of the demand the poem makes (the force of attraction and repulsion it exerts on the reader’s imagination) rules out the possibility that a correct guess at the identity of the addressee will unlock the poem’s meaning. The penultimate line of the poem – “Come not unto me, let me go in peace” – with that embedded “let me go,” is an example of how the poem switches (inside one line) between disengagement and recognition. The change in tone, from command to entreaty, and the interruption of the Faustus quotation (“Come not unto me, *let me go in peace / For no-one and nothing now can rescue me*”) signal a movement in the text towards greater recognition of the self and the other. According to my reading, this movement carries with it the unmistakeable traces of an ambivalence that complicates any desire

⁵⁹ A temporal scheme that is evident in Kleinian theory and practice. As Juliet Mitchell remarks: “Klein’s contribution is to chart an area where present and past are one and time is spatial, not historical” (28).

(whether in this case on the reader's part or the part of the mother-text) for separation, and modifies the mood of any act of purported separation.⁶⁰

The title of Miller's poem "Come Not Unto Me" is derived from a quotation from *Dr Faustus*⁶¹ that also constitutes the poem's epigraph: "Come not unto me for nothing can rescue me." Instead of turning to a discussion of the implications of this reference for the meaning of the poem, I would like to consider the effect of the epigraph on the poem's structure. In his book-length study of how to read poetry and the different effects it employs (*How Poetry Works*), Phil Roberts offers the following comments on the function of the epigraph:

Some poets, particularly in the last hundred years or so, have made use of the *epigraph*, a short quotation from earlier literary works printed at the head of a poem. It is often difficult to know whether an epigraph should be viewed as part of the poem itself, or as something more akin to an emotional stage direction for the reader's benefit. T.S. Eliot uses a six-line quotation from Dante's *Inferno*, in the original fourteenth-century Italian, as an epigraph for "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" [...]. Perhaps, then, it is to be taken as an indirect assertion of the poet's wide-ranging and multilingual literary background, or as a kind of password between poet and a reader of similar background [...]. (125)

Roberts presents the difficulty he experiences when confronted with an epigraph as a difficulty with differentiation, knowing whether to treat the poem and the epigraph as continuous, or to treat them as separate entities; that is, knowing whether the poem and the epigraph are the same, or different. His inability to determine the relation between the poem and its epigraph, and to fix the location of the epigraph and its destination inside or outside the poem (is it addressed to the reader to facilitate the mutual recognition of poet and a certain kind of reader, or is

⁶⁰ The argument here would be that the verb "to separate" expresses itself in the subjunctive rather than the imperative mood, suggesting "a state, event or act as possible, conditional or wished for, rather than as actual" (Ridout and Witting 180).

⁶¹ Faustus: "Ay, pray for me, pray for me; and what noise soever you hear, come not unto me, for nothing can rescue me" (Marlowe, 5.2, 85).

the self-assertion of the poet its ultimate intention?), becomes an issue of dependency: how dependent is the poem on the epigraph for its meaning, and what is the effect of this dependency on the positions of the poet and the reader situated *outside* the poem?

In later discussions of the relation of the poet and the reader to the poem, Roberts guards against the confusion of the positions of the reader and the “you” or addressee of the poem, and the “real” identity of the poet and the “I” of the poem. The distinction he makes (reader and poet are outside the poem, addressee and speaker are inside) is consistent with his treatment of poems as entities (worlds of their own) with describable boundaries. In addition to threatening the stability of the distinctions reader/addressee and poet/speaker (is the poet addressing the reader directly?) the epigraph can be seen to have an effect on the issue of self-identity in the poem in the following ways: it disrupts the opposition speaker/addressee (the speaker of the poem is also a receiver, or reader, of another’s message); it frustrates reader expectations (the poem is not an original, self-contained message, the poem is a reply to, or reading of, a previous message); and it complicates the poet’s persona, or where she is speaking from (the self-identity of that persona is disrupted). The precise problem with the epigraph then, is that it poses a challenge to the notion of self-identity inside the poem and outside, and troubles the economy of irreconcilable oppositions posited by Roberts (epigraph/poem, different/same, outside/inside, separate/dependent), through its ambivalent relation to the poem.

Roberts attempts, through his isolation of the problem of the epigraph, to contain an ambivalence that I have been arguing in my reading of “Come Not Unto Me” is immanent in the relation between the reader and the poem. Like the solipsistic mother conjured by the child, the epigraph is only the most obvious instance of an

ambivalence that is best understood in the context of a relation: in this case, one that is structured around a set of ambivalent textual transactions typical of the relation between the preoedipal mother and child.

The absence of any discussion on how to approach the epigraph (its relation to the poem and the effect of this relation on the poem's reception) in the exchange between Abrahams and Campbell, and in the academic study of Miller's poetry undertaken by Metelerkamp in her master's thesis, is worth pausing over given the general attention paid by both discussions to the structuring of the relations of reader and poet to the text. Abrahams and Campbell spend some time in speculation over the exact identity of the addressee of the poem (particularising Roberts's distinction between a poem's intended addressee and its reader), but are content to conflate the identity of the speaker of the poem with its author.

For her part, Metelerkamp's exclusive focus on the poem's biblical allusions and "religious sounding" diction (and silence on the epigraph) allows her to resolve implicitly the issue of the poem's address: "It is a complex prayer, in superbly simple terms, for release from bondage to the Father" (*Miller* 85). Her use of "speaker" and "poet" as interchangeable terms in her analysis suggests further that her approach to the poem, like that of Abrahams and Campbell, treats the identity of the speaker as a settled matter and, more specifically, that it is identical to that of the poet. My point is that whether the omission of any consideration of the epigraph in these readings signals its total incorporation with the rest of the poem (as if it is one with the poem), or its treatment as totally separate from the poem (as if it is independent of the poem), the implication is that the ambivalence of the relation epigraph-poem (the possibility that the epigraph is both inside and outside the poem at once) has been resolved. This binary logic is equally in evidence in the treatment of the relation

between the poet and the speaker of the poem. Whether their positions are conflated (as they are in the readings offered by Campbell and Abrahams, and Metelerkamp) or differentiated absolutely (by Roberts), the implication remains resoundingly unambivalent: either there is division (poet and speaker are separate), or there is fusion (poet and speaker are one and the same).

My interest in the readings of Miller's poem by Abrahams and Campbell, and Metelerkamp, is not restricted to their attempts to contain the ambivalence of the relations structured around and by the poem. The different strategies they employ in order to regulate the relation poet/speaker on the one hand, and the relation reader/addressee on the other, appear to conform closely to the opposition between the preoedipal mother (as the site of perfect oneness) and the child (as the site of progressive differentiation) depicted in the normative accounts of development discussed earlier in this chapter. The unproblematic conflation of the identities of the poet and the speaker in the readings offered by Campbell and Abrahams, and Metelerkamp, appears in direct contrast to their maintenance of the distinction between the reader and the addressee of the poem. Although a loss of ambivalence is inevitable in both instances, where the poet is associated with an absolute state of undifferentiation through her conflation with the speaker, the reader's separation from the addressee and externality to the poem is meant to serve as a reminder of her readerly independence and the authority of her interpretation outside the poem.

It is my suggestion that the reader's preoccupation with her externality to the poem and its addressee (and the resonance of this individuation with the fully separated Oedipal child) and her conflation of the poet with the speaker (and the resonance of this union with the undifferentiated preoedipal mother or maternal object) enables her to discover at the heart of the poem (as Metelerkamp does) an

unequivocal longing for oneness that offers in turn to resolve the ambivalence structuring her own transactions with the poem: "The subtext of the poem ["Come Not Unto Me"] is that anything which has developed beyond the realm of almost prelapsarian oneness can speak only of inevitable decay and loss" ("Ruth Miller" 86). As a figure for the preodipal mother, the conflation of the poet and speaker comes to stand for an idea of union that the reader as child must devalue (as regressive and absolute) and distance herself from in order that her independence and authority outside the text may be recognised. In this sense, the reader's strategy is directed at preserving an idea of autonomy and defending against what has become a threat of regression. Like the Kleinian psychoanalyst attempting to theorise the preoedipal Imaginary, the reader is confronted with the problem of how to prevent the irruption into her reading of the poem of the "infinite regress" (the "rot") that is indicated by its subtext.⁶²

According to the binary logic of the discourse on development, the reader cannot concede the ambivalence of the poem or the relations structured by it without thereby risking a loss of self. As that from which she must separate to achieve selfhood, the text (and the relations of dependency between the speaker-poet and the addressee inside it) becomes the site for the transfer of a certain reading of the poem (one that is marked by a resolution of ambivalence) onto the poem itself. In the reading that follows, I will attempt to show how the poem subverts constantly the notion of perfect oneness that is claimed to be its subtext. More specifically, the ambivalent transactions between the reader and the text (their alternation between

⁶² "[...] if Klein makes of the analyst a fool and a fantasm, it is from this place that the analyst has to try to speak, bridging the gap, as Rivière puts it at the end of her Introduction, between the baby ignorant of the external world and the scientist aware of nothing else [...] the analyst can bridge the gap only in so far as 'she can assume the baby's condition.' What is this, other than to require psychoanalysis to enter into what Kleinians seem to theorize, to the consternation of their critics, as an infinite regress?" (Rose, *Why War?* 169).

what Benjamin has called, in her description of the preoedipal relation of the mother and the child, “attunement and disjunction”)⁶³ will be shown to militate against the ideal of complete separation that presents as absolute both the reader’s desire for non-implication in the poem and the relations it structures, and Campbell’s claim of perfect exteriority to her mother’s text.

I would like to begin my analysis of Miller’s poem by returning to the issue of the epigraph and its implications for the self-identity or perfect separation of the poem and its speaker. It is my argument that the attribution of the epigraph (Faustus) and its appearance both in the title and the body of the poem underscores the ambivalence of the poet/speaker relation through its disturbance of the boundaries enclosing the text (including both the poem and the text quoted).⁶⁴ For this reason, the reference to Faustus and its incorporation in the poem does not imply simply that the poet is separate from the speaker, but that the very idea of perfect separation (the idea that such a claim depends on) is subverted through the use of quotation (as a mark of non-self-identity) to suggest the tension between self and other that is constitutive of all identity. The self-identity of the epigraph is not without problems of its own; its allusion to a passage from the Bible, “But Jesus said, Suffer little children, and forbid them not, to come unto me: for of such is the kingdom of heaven [...]” (*Holy Bible*, Matt 19:14), resonates with the description of children talking to the speaker but not being “permitted to come to me” in the body of the poem.

⁶³ “As I have shown, that relationship [the preoedipal mother and child] was neither oneness nor perfect – it was always marked by alterations between helplessness and comfort, by the contrast between attunement and disjunction, by an emerging awareness of separation and individual differences” (Jessica Benjamin 173).

⁶⁴ As Walter Benjamin observes in his article on the epic theatre of Brecht: “To quote a text involves the interruption of its context” (151).

The specific reference to the story of Faustus, and its rehearsal of the conflict between worldly knowledge and divine power, has the effect of signposting the tension in the poem, and not the total separation, between its “religious sounding” (Meterlerkamp, “Ruth Miller” 85) diction and its use of more demotic speech and secular allusion. In the first four lines of the poem, what appears to be an allusion to the suffering body of Christ (“whatsoever tusk goreth my side, / whatsoever blood shall bleed [...]”) culminates in an image of the birth of Venus (“Venus rising”) that indicates the inter-implication of each text (the Bible and Classical mythology) in the other: Christ’s pierced body in the gored body of Venus’s lover, Adonis,⁶⁵ the birth of Venus in the resurrection of Christ. My point is that, if Miller’s poem has been read as a prayer for release from the Father (as it has by Metelerkamp) such that the question of the self-identity of the poem (its separation from other texts) and the meaning of the speaker’s request (an unequivocal plea for separation) are resolved through an appeal to the unity of the poem’s form, it is also the case that the poem’s mixed register and subject matter argue for its reading as something like a *travestied* prayer. Not that the intention of the poem is to amuse, but that the disparity between its form and style and putative topic (what kind of prayer includes mythological references, or has as its refrain a line spoken by Faustus, a renegade intellectual who attempted to defy God?) makes the question of the poem’s classification a more complex, because more ambivalent, matter.

⁶⁵ In her retelling of the story of Adonis’s death after the style of a morality tale, Edith Hamilton gives some indication of the suggestive overlap between the figures of Venus and Faust. She gives her description of Adonis’s fatal encounter with the boar (“[Adonis] hurled his spear at [the boar], but he only wounded it, and before he could spring away, the boar mad with pain rushed at him and gored him with its great tusks”) the following gloss: “Aphrodite [Venus] loved him; the Goddess of Love, who pierces with her shafts the hearts of gods and men alike, was fated herself to suffer that same piercing pain” (90). Aphrodite, like Faustus, is punished for her arrogance.

In addition to the ambivalence of the poem's form, the fluctuations in the poem's tone (from heroic to wistful to weary) and obvious delight in its own rhetoric at certain points ("Whatsoever tusk goeth my side, / Whatsoever blood shall bleed"), challenges (with the epigraph) the notion of the singularity of intention in the poem by injecting a note of defiance (a kind of "rising") and verbal playfulness, a physical pleasure in articulation, into its ostensible attitude of despair⁶⁶ ("You my love, with your world / And strong arms soon to *help you hold your head on high*, / You must remember my *terrible tower*"). This playfulness extends to the poem's teasing interruption of moments of self-confession and identification with formulaic proscriptions against such proximity ("For we were all young once and goddesses, / Whatsoever anything – come not unto me") that attract and repel the reader in turn.

The poem's traffic between the general and the particular (or what could also be called incorporation and separation) is constantly called into question by the ambiguity of the words used to signify particularity, and the suggestive contrast between the meaning of certain words and the way they sound. The first line of the poem appears to move from the general ("whatsoever tusk") to the particular ("my side") through a loss of bodily integrity (the goring) that is carried through into the second and third lines with their images of dissipation ("Whatsoever blood shall bleed) and loss of form (the corrupting effects of rot and canker). At the same time, the familial associations of "my side" and "blood" attest to the provisional quality of such distinctions by undermining the possibility of describing finally the boundaries of

⁶⁶ In the context of an essay on Emily Dickinson and her research into "the lesser known, more fugitive emotions [...]" Craig Raine discusses the surprising exhilaration of despair (Dickinson: "'Tis so appalling – it exhilarates") with reference to a particularly apposite, because Faustian, quote from Yeats: "Human beings are drawn to extreme resolutions, as Yeats notes in *The Countess Cathleen*: when the people sell their souls to the devil, the first merchant explains that some do it 'because there is a kind of joy / In casting hope away, in losing joy'. Not *perversity*, merely normal perversity and heightened contrariness" (94).

any body (prototypically the maternal body) or relation (prototypically the preoedipal bond between mother and child).

The poem's stated resignation to the progressive loss of form or decay of a specifically oral nature ("rot" is associated with a corrupt use of language, "canker" with corrosion of the lips), is thrown into question by the style of its articulation: the phonetic hardness of the alliteration ("blood shall bleed") and the consonants in "tusk," "goreth," "rot" and "canker," give these lines a viscous quality (they do not flow) that slows the poem by forcing the reader to give each word its full value. In the third and fourth lines of the poem ("Canker the softest part of Venus rising / For we were all young once and goddesses") the greater correspondence between the senses and sounds of certain words effects an increase in the poem's pace. The softness of "the softest part" is amplified through the use of palatal and sibilant sounds, and the sexual implications of the reference to Venus and her "rising"⁶⁷ are hinted at through the suggestive imprecision and aural overlap of the sibilance in "Venus rising" and "once and goddesses".

The pairing of "part" with "softest" weakens the aural discreteness of that designation, and also subverts the idea of progressive differentiation or separation immanent in the action of "rising". The thrust of the image of "Venus rising" is itself softened, and the reference to classical mythology modified (in the sense of being "brought down") by the interruption of a more personal voice: "For we were all young once and goddesses". The suggestion that the softening of the poem's diction in the fourth line is bathetic points to its subtle departure ("softest part") from the declamatory style (the "rising") of the previous lines, and the insinuation of another

⁶⁷ Venus, Roman goddess of sexual love and beauty, in one version of the myth, rose fully grown but naked out of the foam that formed when the Titan Cronos castrated his hated father Uranus and threw the phallus into the sea.

“voice” that troubles the issue of self-identity (of the speaker and the addressee) in the poem.

The constant movement in the poem between ambiguous states of inclusion and exclusion (the diffusion of the apparent specificity of the “softest part of Venus” by the inclusiveness of “we were all [...] goddesses” – an inclusiveness that is itself qualified by the singularity of that “once”) is repeated in the relation that is structured between reader and poem. The poem guides the reader through cells, corridors, a world (or worlds: “the world” becomes “a world,” and then “your world”) of entrances that simultaneously “entrances some of her senses” and disengages them (“stops them”) through the continuous retraction and reinstatement of the boundaries between a contained external geography (the prison, the corridor, the garden, the beach) and a body that suffers (endures and allows) alteration (penetration and corruption) and displacement (“the throat of my despair”). The pervasiveness of oral imagery in the poem, whether oblique (“Canker the softest part”) or stated (“With a grimace that children take to be a smile”), together with the pronounced orality or performative quality of its language, situates the poem’s alternation between states of separation and proximity in a series of ambivalent oral transactions between reader and poem. The reader is alternately drawn to, or incorporated into, the poem (in a way that is not necessarily comfortable), and resistant to, or left out of, the poem, according to its variation of diction, pace, and language sounds.

The reader’s attempts to separate and articulate meanings and sounds in the poem, to understand (penetrate) the poem, are implicated in the penetration of a body that is also a body of text (the poem), and whose intactness is challenged from within and without. The poem, like the gored “side” in the first line, is a partial document, “pricked” with incidental interjections (the dramatic repetition of “Tho I” in

lines six and seven is broken by the almost parenthetical addition of the unspectacular “Or sit and walk alone by day”) and disrupted by insubordinate elements (language effects) that the reader, like those non-specific “children,” can use selectively (“With a grimace that children take to be a smile / So that they talk to me”) or treat as “mere disposable noise”⁶⁸ in the interests of interpretation. The speaker’s self-confessed inarticulacy (“Tho I cry” and “Whatsoever noise”) allows her both to claim and renounce authority by granting permission to the reader to collude with the text in disregarding any language effects that might disturb the progress of a more univocal reading (“let me go in peace [piece]”) while at the same time drawing attention to the persistence of such effects.

The dash at the end of the enjambed line (“So that they talk to me in the garden, on the beach / Under the striped awning, saying ‘I am five’ –”) functions like a hesitation in the text, a brief withholding, that confers significance on the repeated “Five –” which in turn produces a cluster of effects whose potential randomness works to subvert the notion of intention and authority in the poem: the repetition of the five-lettered word “world”; the aural conspicuousness of the “fore [four]” in “before”; the suggestiveness of the word “even” in relation to that odd “Five”; and the reference to “some [sum] of my senses” (five?) – itself a phrase containing five syllables. That the question of what to make of such effects (how to take them) resists easy resolution is reflected in the ambiguous context of the word “before” (the

⁶⁸ This phrase and other terms used in the passage occur in a discussion of Frank Kermode’s on the comforts of narrative sequence, *ethos*, and *dianoia* for both the author of a text and his reader: “Such are their comforts, and sometimes we want them badly enough to wish away what has to come with them: the treacherous text, with its displacements and condensations, its debauched significances and unofficial complicities. Because the authors may themselves be alarmed by these phenomena (but also because they need to please), we may enter in to collusion with them and treat all the evidence of insubordinate text as mere disposable noise or use the evidence selectively, when it can be adapted to strengthen the façade of propriety” (165). That final observation on “the façade of propriety” has particular resonance with Miller’s description of a grimace amended into a smile.

world awaiting the children, or predated them?) and the suspenseful “But / They are not permitted to come to me” (does the “they” refer to the children, or “some of my [the speaker’s] senses”?). The absolute separation of these competing possibilities into meaning and meaningless (“rot”) is achieved only through the installation of a conventional boundary or protocol of reading (“a wall”) that “stops” reader, and poet, from exploring some senses of the text, including those that would recast the question of the poem’s addressee as a question of intentionality and authority in the poem: is the speaker consciously trying to address anyone, and does she know what she is saying?

The next section of the poem (beginning “You my love, with your world / And strong arms soon to help you hold your head on high”) with its high degree of separation on the page (the “You” follows after a full stop mid-line, and the section ends on a full stop and on its “own” line) and in the text (“your world,” those disarticulated “strong arms” and series of aspirated sounds “help you hold your head on high”) and its emphatic statements (“You *must* remember my terrible tower / From which *no-one* can rescue me but my *own* jailer / With my *own* hands”) reads like a materialisation, in language, of that wall. In addition to the visual and aural aspects that seem to support the self-identity of the section, the installation of a more specific addressee in the poem (“You my love”) at this stage, marks a break from the rest of the poem with its implied addressee (“come not unto me”) and undifferentiated audience (“For we were all young once and goddesses”).

The demonstrativeness of the designation “You my love” (it is both affectionate and indicative) underscores the self-imposed confinement of the speaker in the poem, itself a “terrible tower” or unbroken column (the poem is not organised into separate stanzas) that is contrasted with the expansiveness of the

addressee's "world". The suggestion that the speaker is inside the poem, and the addressee without, carries with it the force of a prohibition: the addressee is charged with remembering the isolation of the speaker and warned off trying to alleviate this isolation through the peremptory possessiveness of that repeated "my own".

What this could amount to, in the context of a discussion on Miller's literary legacy and an analysis of the poem "Come Not Unto Me," is a request from the poet to be left to slip into obscurity ("let me go in peace") by an aspiring literary child ("You my love").⁶⁹ To take this as the final message of the poem is, firstly, to treat the speaker of the poem and Miller as identical. In addition, this interpretation disregards not only the speaker's ambivalence over her potential neglect (the dramatic self-display of the first three lines; the audibility of the crying and the noise; the grimace that can be mistaken for a smile) but also the ambivalence of that prohibition,⁷⁰ and the ambivalence of the relation reader/poem (inside/outside) that the prohibition acknowledges, through its very existence.

The expanded version of the epigraph in the last two lines of the poem ("Come not unto me, let me go in peace / For no-one and nothing now can rescue me") subverts its own desire to "go in peace" by undoing the self-identity of the quotation and refusing the neat resolution offered by its unproblematic incorporation at the end. The location of the epigraph at the head and end of the poem and its use of prohibition and negation suggests that it might function as some kind of

⁶⁹ The ambiguity of that request "let me go in peace [piece]" suggests that the poet's interest in being neglected may be grounded in her reservations over the enterprise of literary criticism in general, that she wishes her work to be left intact, or of a piece, with the poetry (or poetry in general) providing its own best commentary or auto-critique.

⁷⁰ The fact that the request "let me go in peace" recalls a line (379) from Shakespeare's *Venus and Adonis* ("For shame," he cries, "let go, and let me go [...]") spoken by the exasperated and withholding Adonis to his predatory pursuer, Venus, underscores the tantalising nature of the transaction for the increasingly importunate reader (17).

provisional boundary to the poem (“a wall”) that enables the reader to make sense of the poem while at the same time necessarily imposing limits on her reading. Like Kristeva’s conception of the primary maternal prohibitions and material rejections of the preoedipal that enable symbolic rejection, negation, and separation, the “wall” that stops “some senses” in the poem also conditions the transactions between reader and poem that will come to constitute a reading.

In this way, the prohibition and negation contained in the epigraph is emblematic of the attempt of poet and reader, through their mobilisation of differential signs, to militate against the nothingness (the fear of no-meaning) that motivates and threatens the capacity to think (and the emergence and continuity of identity). As one possible entry point to a reading of “Come Not Unto Me,” the epigraph serves as a reminder (“you must remember”) of the prohibitions and negations that function to limit the ambivalence immanent in any reading, while at the same time actively preserving that ambivalence as a critical resource through the epigraph’s own marginalisation (or what Kristeva might call “abjection”)⁷¹ in readings of the poem.

⁷¹Kristeva: “We may call it a border; abjection is above all ambiguity” (*Powers of Horror* 9).

Chapter Three

In the bat-soft cave we were afraid
And forced the word up – Aagh! Into the dark.
Now we are afraid to enter her.
We stay outside at the entrance and long ineptly
To make, for the first time, fire,
To call, for the first time, Come. (Miller “Voicebox”)

I must hasten to add that I am not an ardent admirer of my mother, as you are – I saw and knew of her faults, (one of which was that she was a very bad mother – despite her ‘anxiety’) [...]. (Unpublished correspondence, Campbell to Abrahams, 9 November 1990)

Boland’s description of the obstacles she encounters in her attempt to find a language and to clear a space for her writing in “the national tradition and the claim it had made on Irish literature” (185) recalls Metelerkamp’s searching after appropriate authority for her writing (and the writing of other women poets) in post-Apartheid South Africa. In the memoir that traces her emergence and development as a poet, Boland writes:

I know now that I began writing in a country where the word woman and the word poet were almost magnetically opposed. One word was used to invoke collective nurture, the other to sketch out self-reflective individualism. (xi)

Like Metelerkamp, Boland is searching for some kind of entry permit into her country’s literary past that will enable her to write poetry that does not, at the same time, enforce her effacement as a woman, leaving her with what she describes as “an uncanny sense of spoiled identity and uncertain origin” (125). In the process, she discovers that, however much she admires the skilful construction or powerful expression of the poems in the Irish national tradition, she cannot find in them the permission she seeks to write; instead, she finds the permission she is seeking in poems that include “a perception of powerlessness and therefore a true understanding of the power of language” (111).

It is this perception of powerlessness that I am arguing constitutes the subtext of Miller's poetry. A subtext that Metelerkamp, in particular, regrets and that charts Miller's defeat, not by patriarchal structures or political systems or barely grasped socio-historic limitations only, but by her ambivalent recognition of the weakness of language itself. The poetry carries the knowledge ("its own / Long, long knowledge") of language's fallibility: that it cannot, in its very constitution, offer protection against time, restore what was lost, or shed its past, ultimately. In Boland's account of language, this knowledge, or perception of the limits of language is the only authentic source of literary authority:

Paradoxically that authority grows the more the speaker is weakened and made vulnerable by the tensions he or she creates. By the same logic, it is diminished if the speaker protects himself or herself by the powers of language he or she can generate. (186)

Metelerkamp makes the perceived failure of Miller's aesthetic in feminist terms (that is, what Metelerkamp identifies as her "lack of positive vision" and defeat by the relentless "contradictions" of her "social and literary context" ("Father's Lore" 57)) instructive for her would-be literary daughters by engaging with the material conditions of her writing. The reading of Miller's poetry that I am advocating looks at the poetry's "lack of positive vision" and the repetitiveness of its contradictions and relates it to the Kleinian concept of negativity as fundamental to the emergence and constitution of subjectivity:

What seems to be outrageous – paradoxically harder to manage than death as a pure force, as something which assaults the subject from outside – is this internalization of death into the structure. If death is a pure point of biological origin, then at least it can be scientifically known. But if it enters into the process of psychic meanings, inseparable from the mechanisms through which subjects create and recreate their vision of the world, then from where can we gain the detachment with which to get it under control? (Rose, *Why War?* 160)

The ambivalence of the Kleinian concept of negativity allows the reader to approach Miller's aesthetic differently, to see its "lack of positive vision" as an integral part of her creativity and a source of its renewal.

Against those accounts that turn to Klein for a redemptive account of social and political being, I would suggest that the value of Klein's insights resides precisely in their negativity, in their own points of internal resistance to narratives of resolution, even if it is those narratives which her own writings and those of her followers have increasingly come to propose. The history of her (but not only her) institution suggests that we are never more vulnerable to the caprices of the superego and to the potential violence of identities than when we take it at its word. (Rose, *Why War?* 223)

To use André Green's formulation, the negativity of Miller's aesthetic could be seen to act as an unbinding that "produces discontinuity without which the mechanisms of recombination could not take place" (Kohon ed., 171). In other words, and as I have stated before, those aspects of Miller's poetry that are treated as regrettable in some readings of her poetry can be re-viewed not only as the motivation behind her poems (as manifestations of the interplay of discontinuity and recombination) but also as a constituent part of the poetry's attractiveness for readers and an impetus behind their desire to write their way after it.⁷²

According to this approach, any reading claiming that Miller's aesthetic vision or creativity would have been improved (that is, resolved) by a feminist discourse that it unfortunately predated misses not only the transformative potential of art (it is not purely representational) but also the most unsettling aspects of Kleinian negativity in its relation to aesthetic theory, that is, that negativity resists localisation either inside or outside the subject and that it ignores ordinary causality. Miller's aesthetic vision is not reducible, therefore, to her historical circumstances, or even

⁷² The expression is taken from J.M. Coetzee's description of reading Kafka: "My experience is that it is not reading that takes me into the last twist of the burrow, but writing. No intensity of reading that I can imagine would succeed in guiding me through Kafka's word-labyrinth: to do that I would once again have to take up the pen and, step by step, write my way after him" (David Attwell ed., *Doubling the Point*, 199).

her subjective interpretation of them. It is part of a complex and ongoing set of negotiations between form and desire that is differently enabled at different historical moments and that defies any attempts on the reader's part (including Miller's as a reader of her own poetry) to identify the source of her art: "I find I was already aware of what I found" (Miller "Discoveries").

The failure of the Miller corpus to be everything for the reader (to speak to her of "life and presence and possibility" (McGrane)) can be seen in terms of the daughter's impossible demand that the mother compensate, through the plenitude of meaning and knowledge that she is deemed to possess, for the sense of absence and loss that language, or representation, tries to cover over (the frailty of signs). The daughter's demand, unexamined, makes the mother responsible for that sense of absence and loss and, in the case of literary maternity, transfers the anger attendant on the sense of absence and loss onto her writing.

The approach I am suggesting would give the reader the opportunity to read the Miller corpus differently: by provisionally separating from Miller's work from the start, the reader would be made more aware of her implication in the reading she was offering. This critical distance could change the nature of the demands the reader makes on the text and enable her to interpret Miller's "lack of positive vision" in terms other than those of its failure or success to satisfy the daughter-reader's needs.

Further, in Miller's "hard case," the poetry's perceived "lack of positive vision" indicates its comparison with the Kleinian bad object and its situation at the heart of object relations:

For the loss of the object forces a breach in the primitive narcissism of the subject, a breach which, in a twist, then produces the object as its effect: 'the ego's need to dissociate itself from the unpleasure is so great that it *requires an object* upon which it can expel it...For such an

experience of unpleasure is too intense to be merely “killed”, hallucinated as non-existent. [...].⁷³ The lost object is not, therefore, only the hallucinated object of satisfaction; it is also and simultaneously an object which, because of this failure of negative hallucination, is required – is actively sought after – *in order to be bad*. (Rose, *Why War?* 151 her emphasis)

Distrusting Miller’s writing, to borrow Rose’s account of the emergence of the Kleinian bad object, is better than the reader’s despairing about her never-secure constitution in and through signs. The availability of Miller’s text to be transformed into, or hallucinated as, the Kleinian bad object in order that this sense of primordial absence and loss can be denied is what enables the child “to write.” When the literary daughter looks at her relation to Miller’s text through the lens of Kleinian object relations theory, she begins to see that her ambitions to save the mother from the negativity of her vision, is a radical misreading of the textual relations that the negativity of the text enables. On the contrary, and the reader’s self-arrogation as saviour of the maternal corpus notwithstanding, the persecutory object relation with the bad object that is Miller’s text, evident in Metelerkamp’s critique of Miller’s poetry, could be said to “save” the child. It is in this way that the “black fish” of Miller’s “Penguin on the Beach” comes to nurture the reader, however ambivalently.

Metelerkamp does not say at any point that Miller should be a literary mother *despite* her failures to sanction a revolt against patriarchal authority. She maintains that the fact of Miller’s failure to diagnose and to resolve her contradictions makes her case instructive for her daughters. In this version of literary maternity, Miller’s work does not offer to nurture her literary daughters; her aesthetic presents them with an object lesson in what *not* to do. Metelerkamp’s suggestion, therefore, is that South African poets of her generation, particularly women poets, seek connections

⁷³ Rose is quoting from Joan Rivière, “Psychical Conflict in Earliest Infancy”, pp. 54 –5.

with Miller in order to make the link, see the historical continuity, between the socio-historic challenges to their writing that Miller was up against then (her unproductive engagement with different kinds of inhibiting authority) and what they are up against now.

Metelerkamp's nomination of Miller as a literary mother is a political act to the extent that it resembles the feminist strategy of re-appropriation and historical exigency outlined in Chapter One, but she limits the usefulness of the suggested identification with Miller to the instructive example that Miller's own grappling with "contradictions" might provide for younger poets – a recommendation that strikes the reader familiar with the extent of Miller's influence on Metelerkamp's own poetry as, to say the least, surprisingly conservative. A quick overview of Metelerkamp's academic writing on Miller (including an unpublished conference paper, her master's thesis and a published paper) in comparison with the poetry she wrote on/for Miller reveals a difference in approach that is suggestive for my discussion on the relation of Miller's literary maternity to the literary criticism that defines her *oeuvre*. On Metelerkamp's own admission, the tone of her thesis on Miller is combative: "I wasn't blaming Miller for her lack of 'positive' vision (because I did find sociological explanations for it), but I was fighting it" (McGrane) while the solicitous tone of her poetry reflects her ongoing attempts to get through to Miller, past her writing, and "in":

such depth of sorrow you kept
encased, Scarab-like
unadmitted, unadmitted,
that readers, knocking on the hard case of metaphor, plead
let us in let us in. (Metelerkamp, "Ruth Miller" *Towing the Line* 120–
121)

The above stanza is a dramatisation of Metelerkamp's experience of reading Miller's work that seems to ascribe the attraction of the work for readers in general to

the tantalising resistance it offers their attempts at interpretation (that repeated “unadmitted” resonating with ideas of repression and exclusion at the same time). The experience Metelerkamp dramatises is representative: she speaks for “readers” of Miller’s work in general (a “we” that, unlike Miller’s “They,” Metelerkamp counts herself among, “let *us* in”), a subject position that hints at the scope of Metelerkamp’s project: to make Miller’s work (“unearthed from what decades-long debris”) fit for use by other women poets.

Metelerkamp’s conscious assumption of the responsibility to “save” Miller for other women poets (comparable to what Spivak calls “vanguardism” in the context of cultural studies (Jonathan Arac and Barbara Johnson eds, 155 and 159) could account for her lukewarm recommendation of Miller as a literary mother whose work seems to offer little in the way of conventional nurturing or guidance to her would-be literary daughters. Metelerkamp’s preference for the squeamish expression “lack of positive vision” instead of “negative vision” to describe what she reads as Miller’s “overwhelming sadness” and “nihilism” (McGrane) could be part of the same protective gesture, meant to keep Miller’s work from summary banishment to the “defined Siberia” of an unreadable negativity. This is the moment of danger at which the importunate pleas of literary daughters (“let us in let us in”) risks turning into a grim admission of literary aversion, “Now we are afraid to enter her. / We stay outside at the entrance and long ineptly...” (Miller “Voicebox”). The Kleinian concept of negativity, as I have outlined, intervenes in the absolutes of rejection or reparation suggested above by putting different reading resources at the would-be literary daughter’s disposal.

Ultimately, though, despite her cautious recommendation of Miller as a literary mother, what Metelerkamp leaves unsaid and what the reader is left to infer is that

she believes for Miller's poet-daughters to keep writing in a way that sustains their faith in their own creativity, they need to get beyond Miller. In other words, and in a socialist feminist reading of literary maternity that recalls Klein's formula for the emergence of symbolic capacity in the child (but that crucially overlooks the part played by phantasy in the process) in order for Miller's literary daughters to continue to be creative, they need to separate from Miller's text. The text which, in a twist of separation, manifests as the bad object.

Where does this leave readers of Miller's work other than poets who come to the poetry not looking for nurturance (food for thought) only, but for the chance to write their way after Miller's words, to follow them,⁷⁴ and to transmit Miller's literary legacy? These readers are confronted with an "incontestable" reading of Miller's poetry that can provide no compelling reason for a return to Miller's *oeuvre* and a perpetuation of her legacy "when what it offers as the true content of that legacy is death" (Rose, *Why War?* 148). These are the readers looking for a reason to carry on reading the poetry (making more signs from it) with whom, according to Abrahams, Miller would have no patience ("she had no patience for analytical criticism" (13)). Among other things, the visibility of Miller's work as a topic for academic theses, book chapters and literary articles, especially after the release of Miller's collected work, testifies to the fact that readers like writing about Miller's poetry. One of the work's more conspicuous effects on its readers then, is that it seems to make them write or, in the context of a mother-child relation, it teaches

⁷⁴ Eavan Boland's reservations with feminism's limitation as an aesthetic provides some insight into the sense that Metelerkamp's reading of Miller's poetry, like the child's oral ambivalence, devours Miller in the process of trying to identify with her: "An aesthetic is a deductive process which is formed by the work of art inflecting the views about it – the critique that follows the work of art. Feminism is not a critique that follows the work of art; it's a powerful series of deductions about society, which once it gets into the work of art, takes over what's in it" (Boland qtd. in Randolph, 119).

them “to turn ‘into signifying form’ everything that unites them [the reader and the text]” (Johnson, *Mother Tongues* 66).

The challenge for these readers (a challenge that Metelerkamp’s socialist feminist reading is unable to meet) is to find a way of reading the Miller corpus that comes close to being able to account for the effect of her poetry on its readers, especially younger women poets, that is, to try and register in literary theory what it is that their poetry registers and that makes them write back to her in a gesture of ambivalent identification. This is the kind of reading that would look to open the Miller corpus up to more readings by demanding of literary critics that they think like poets. What this might mean, if we follow Johnson’s definition of poetry as “the repository of knowledge about the resistance of language to intentional dissolution” (*World 7*), is for critics to read with an increased tolerance for ambiguity and ambivalence or, in terms of the maternal relation this thesis invokes, incomplete separation

The approach that I am suggesting puts phantasy back into the picture and emphasises the provisionality of separation from the mother by drawing attention to the fact that it is a separation that is achieved both against and *with* the mother. In this way, and unlike Metelerkamp’s one-sided getting-past Miller, the reader is made aware of her implication in the text.

My intention in this discussion has been to establish a framework for an exploration of the topic of literary maternity as a relation that enables where it is seen to fail and the potential functionality of this relation in readings of Miller’s poetry. My interest in the idea of maternal failure is restricted to its effectiveness as a critique of the maternal ideal, or “phallic mother” in psychoanalytic literature, what Johnson describes as “the ideal everyone wants the mother to live up to, the ideal of perfect reciprocity, perfect knowledge, total response” (*Mother Tongues* 87). This is the ideal

that Metelerkamp's critique of Miller's poetry appears to want the poetry to embody. Any extension of the topic to include sociological data on the negligence or abuses of real mothers is, therefore, beyond the scope of this thesis. It is also not my intention in this chapter to offer an analysis of Miller's relationship with her own mother, though I shall be drawing on the limited biographical material available on Miller and her unpublished correspondence, as well as her daughter's unpublished correspondence with Miller's literary executor, fellow writer and friend, Abrahams. My intention is to use the biographical material and the correspondence to point up the suggestive overlaps of the real daughter's interventions in her mother's literary legacy with the interventions of Miller's literary children (Abrahams and Metelerkamp) in her corpus.

The discussion that follows will show how the failures attributed to the Miller corpus and her legacy, as they take shape in readings of her work, also enable those readings, and re-readings, to take place; in other words, how those aspects of Miller's work that undermine the reader's attempts at idealisation, or infuse her reading with an ambivalence she cannot resolve, also create opportunities for the reader to think and to write creatively such that the distinction between critics and poets begins to thin.

In her study of the poet's mother, Johnson chooses as her examples the mothers of Charles Baudelaire and Sylvia Plath and analyses the effect of their well-documented and widely recognised maternal "failures" on their children's creativity. The point that Johnson makes is that it is precisely the failure of the real mother (in this case, Caroline Aupick and Aurelia Plath) in relation to an ideal of motherhood that provides both poets (and their critics, but that is another story) with a pretext for their writing. Johnson's essay on the poet's mother provides me with a point of

departure for my own more discursive reading of the “failures” of Miller’s poetry as a maternal text for her readers, and the implications of that failure for readings of her poetry.

Johnson begins her essay by pointing out the mother’s “fundamental role in language learning” to give some indication of why mothers should be implicated in their children’s writing at all. Her approach serves not only to contest the preoedipal version of the mother as “pure bodily closeness and nonverbal communication”, but also to make plain the mother’s stake in language activities through her uneasy location at the border between instinct (affect) and symbolisation (representation):

A child comes into language through the mother’s address. It is her job to transform a little animal into a little human being. The fact that she does this by teaching the child to speak indicates that, however dependent on her the child may be in fact, her most important lesson will be to turn “into signifying form” everything that unites them. Might poetry be an attempt not to address the mother but to *hear her voice*? Is poetry perhaps a way of *being addressed*? (*Mother Tongues* 66)

It follows from this, as Johnson proposes, that one way of reading Baudelaire’s and Plath’s poetry is as an attempt to hear their mothers’ voices, to be addressed in their mother tongue, so to speak; to be called. It also follows from this that the mother, through her work of transformation and her implication in the delicate and incomplete process of separation through symbolisation can be held accountable for the unavoidable pain and sense of loss that accompanies the acquisition of subjectivity.

This felt catastrophe is simply the fact that there is an unconscious that we cannot fully know [...] either the other or ourselves. We try to limit the damage, we protect ourselves from the felt danger, by fleshing out our anxiety, giving that zone of anguish a name: femininity, non-language, body. But the name we give it before all others, the one we really hold answerable for it, is the mother. (Rose, *Sleep* 158–159)

The more the child is faced with the madness “that ego psychology terms reality” (Rose, *Sleep* 160), the more she fabricates the notion of a maternal ideal that must have existed *before* and against which her own mother is measured.

Belief in the mother is rooted in our fascinated fear with the impoverishment of language. If language is powerless to situate me for, or speak me to, the other, then I presume – I yearn to believe – that someone somewhere will make up for that impoverishment. Someone, or rather someone female, *before* there was speech, *before* it – before the unconscious – spoke, before language pummelled me, via frontiers, separations, vertigos, into being. (Kristeva “Stabat Mater” 175–176)

The maternal ideal stands between the child and her recognition of the fact that “All ego-development and any experiencing of ourselves as subjects has to be achieved against an essential background of loss and of absence” (Parsons in Kohon (ed) 71). The cultural entrenchment of this defensive infantile ideal travesties the real mother by portraying the child’s fantasy of “perfect reciprocity, perfect knowledge, total response” as a reasonable because realisable expectation.

The mother’s limitations cannot be forgiven: they can only be a source of deprivation for the child. The child thus gets to believe in the possibility that deprivation is not necessary but contingent, a function of the sins of this particular mother and not of the process of becoming human itself. (Johnson, *Mother Tongues* 85)

What is lost in the formulation of the perfect mother is not only, as Johnson points out elsewhere, the mother’s life (the fact that there are other people in it), but also the enabling quality of her “failure”. The mother has to be seen to fail, to be set up for failure, in order for the child to separate from her and to become, creatively, a subject. “She has to consent to fail, and to be felt as failing, *for the good of the child*” (*Mother Tongues* 85). By failing to be everything for the child, and overseeing the child’s entry into language, the mother liberates the child from a world of blind instinct, or in psychoanalyst André Green’s words, she “gives the infant’s passion a chance” (Phillips in Kohon (ed) 241).

Perfection is terrible, it cannot have children. (Sylvia Plath “The Munich Mannequins”)

I could say that through a failed poem, I tumbled on a field of force. (Eavan Boland 207)

In order to clarify my approach to the question of the potential functioning of Miller's maternity in the literary criticism describing her *oeuvre*, I will present an overview of critical responses to her work, drawing predominantly on commentary offered by Metelerkamp and Abrahams. Both writers self-consciously structure their relation to Miller along filial lines, which argues for my treatment of their readings as the work of Miller's children, at least metaphorically. When asked in an interview in 2006 what interested her about Miller's writing, Metelerkamp replied that she was "looking for a literary mother and what I [she] found was the kind of vision which was not far from what my biological mother could have articulated" (McGrane); Abrahams informs the reader in his introduction to Miller's collected writing that he "stood to her [Miller] in the relation of literary protégé" (10) and elsewhere that "She [Miller] was the first poet who enabled me to take my verse-writing seriously. She gave me a license to call it poetry" (Abrahams in Mike Alfred, *Johannesburg Portraits* 110). Both Metelerkamp and Abrahams, in different ways, register difficulties with the ambiguity, allusiveness, perfectionism, and indirectness of Miller's poetry in their readings of her work while also lending support to the idea that Miller's voice is an authoritative one in South African literature.

Going over the work once more before sending it to Carrefour, I was extraordinarily moved by the uncollected poems. They spoke to me so strongly of a rare, intense inner life that it was like encountering some previously secret aspect of your mother as it awoke from a hibernation that had lasted twenty years – like those crickets that lie dormant underground for many years then waken and sing. (Unpublished correspondence, Abrahams to Campbell, 16 August 1989)

The vivid and tender description of rereading given above appears in a letter Abrahams wrote to Miller's daughter a year before he finally secured publication of Miller's collected writing in one volume. The reason for its inclusion here (where it

might seem otherwise out of place) is its resonance with Johnson's definition of "an inventorial awakening" (Johnson, *World* 31) discussed previously in relation to Lockett's and Metelerkamp's feminist rereadings of Miller's *oeuvre*. Abrahams's description will also be shown to point up the selective nature of such "awakenings" in general.

Of course, Abrahams belongs to the group of masculine critics Lockett charges with misrepresenting Miller for their own patriarchal ends; he is also "Unfortunately [...] the critical 'parent' who has done the most to distort and 'smother' the feminine aspects of Ruth Miller's work" (190). For Lockett these "feminine aspects" would seem to include, for women poets in general, the traces of "anger at their oppression and their 'otherness' as women and as poets" (189) that her reading of Miller's poetry aims to uncover. Without wanting to dispute entirely Lockett's analysis of the shortcomings of Abrahams's approach, it seems to me that her attribution of a paternal role to him in relation to Miller is partly responsible for her reductive separation of Miller's writing and its readings into self-identical masculine and feminine elements.

Perhaps if Lockett viewed Abrahams-the-reader less as an authoritative law-giver and more as a child, specifically a son, anxiously trying to settle the boundaries of the Miller corpus (which is also the body of the mother with which he is entrusted) she might detect in his reading activities something more equivocal than her comparison with distortion and smothering suggests. In the comment quoted above from Abrahams's letter, admittedly taken from a less formal source than Lockett is consulting, it is possible to discern a subtle tension between Abrahams's wanting to locate himself as a separate, authoritative entity outside the poems, as their privileged addressee ("They spoke to me") and editor, and the narcissistic desire to

see himself in them “like those crickets that lie dormant underground for many years then waken and sing.”

It is clear from Abrahams’s editorial decision to publish only half the available uncollected material in Miller’s collected volume that, contrary to the expansive comment reproduced above, not all the uncollected poems “spoke” to him; also, that the publication of Miller’s writing, especially the “previously secret aspect” of it that Abrahams recognises as part of the Miller corpus, might equally have presented Abrahams, arguably her most authoritative reader (in his role as editor and literary executor of the Miller estate) with an opportunity to “sing.” Metelerkamp’s reservations over his choice of title for the collected volume bears out this impression: “[I]s “Ruth Miller” part of the title or not? Whether the title is *Ruth Miller: Poems Prose Plays* or *Poems Prose Plays* makes a difference as to how one perceives the author. Is the author of the recovered voice Abrahams or Miller?” (“Ruth Miller” 25)

The plural maleness of that final image of crickets (critics? calling for a mate or settling a territorial dispute?) occurring, as it does, after that hesitant dash, effects something like a slippage in Abrahams’s description of being “extraordinarily moved” (stirred?) and “a previously secret aspect” of Miller’s waking from hibernation: it is no longer clear to the reader whose “awakening” is being celebrated or where the irrepressible “singing” is coming from. One suggestion is that Abrahams, in his role as an authoritative critic and a “neither self-aggrandising nor possessive” (Metelerkamp, “Ruth Miller and a Poetry of Loss” 26) literary executor for Miller’s estate, is stirring, at last. If he has lain dormant throughout the dispute between Metelerkamp and Chapman over the Miller corpus, then this publication, his

exhilarated comment seems to suggest, might give him something like the last word. The collected volume is the work of both Miller and Abrahams, and neither of them.

The larger point I am trying to make is this: if Lockett is correct in saying that Miller “as she is known to South African readers of poetry, is the creation of masculine critics” (190), it is also the case that these critics (or crickets) are immanent in (possibly even a “secret aspect” of) Miller’s text, as “subjects partly produced in the reading of the work” (Attridge 87). All “inventorial awakenings,” to varying degrees, are processes of selection and exclusion (“they spoke to me”) – revivals of bodies of work that happen in the present and that reflect on the needs of the reader.

Looked at from another perspective, and in response to “one feminist account of women’s writing [that] women can write only by identifying with the male sexual organ (the male ‘part’) in which our literary tradition, in barely disguised metaphor, has located its genealogy and worth” Rose argues:

if we have come to acknowledge that writing may involve for the woman an enforced male identification, condition of entry for women into a tradition which has only partially allowed them a place, we have perhaps asked ourselves less what type of strange, perverse, semi-licensed pleasures such an identification might release. (*The Haunting of Sylvia Plath* 117)

Miller’s much-anthologised poem “Penguin on the Beach” could be read as an allegory of the woman writer’s predicament described above:

Stranger in his own element,
Sea-casualty, the castaway manikin
Waddles in his tailored coat-tails. Oil

Has spread a deep commercial stain
Over his downy shirt front. Sleazy, grey,
It clogs the sleekness. Far too well

He must recall the past, to be so cautious:
Watch him step into the waves. He shudders
Under the froth; slides, slips, on the wet sand,

Escaping to dryness, dearth, in a white cascade
An involuntary shouldering off of gleam.
Hands push him back into the sea. He stands

In pained and silent expostulation.
Once he knew a sunlit, leaping smoothness,
But close within his head's small knoll, and dark

He retains the image: Oil on sea,
Green slicks, black lassos of sludge
Sleeving the breakers in a stain-spread scarf.

He shudders now from the clean flinching wave,
Turns and plods back up the yellow sand,
Ineffably wary, triumphantly sad.

He is immensely wise: he trusts nobody. His senses
Are clogged with experience. He eats
Fish from his Saviour's hands, and it tastes black.

If her "enforced male identification" makes her "a stranger in his own element" (the pronoun confusion here is deliberate) it might also be the case, so the poem would seem to suggest, that the woman poet as "castaway manikin" is "triumphantly sad" in response. While such grim exultation in the face of her abjection by language could count as a subversive form of resistance, or a strange pleasure on the poet's part,⁷⁵ its value as an alternative source of authority for women writers seeking freedom from what Boland has called "an uncanny sense of spoiled identity [sleazy, grey, / It clogs the sleekness]" and uncertain origin ["Once he knew a sunlit, leaping smoothness"] is not entirely clear.

The impression created in some of the feminist criticism of Miller's poetry that the desire to offer a corrective or definitive reading of Miller's poetry is resisted solely

⁷⁵ Charles Eglington picks up on this idea of the surprising exhilaration of despair (discussed in Chapter Two in relation to Miller's poem "Come Not Unto Me") in his "Homage to Ruth Miller": "There is an apparent enigma in much of her poetry: the beautiful could sadden her just as sadness could take on a glow of tenderness and joy" (Abrahams, *Miller* 21). Again, in his reading of "Penguin on the Beach" he comments: "Her penguin is comic, and sad because he has been fouled by the sleazy, grey 'commercial stain' of oil" (23). And again: "She could, in a sense, vanquish defeat by admitting to it – often with a touch of wryness" (26).

by critical competitors positioned outside the text is mistaken. It is my argument that the ambivalent textual relations activated within readings of Miller's work blunt the purposeful reader's intentions most effectively. Metelerkamp's comment that "The multiple ambiguities in Miller's poems are in this sense a weakness, or at the very least they make more work for the reader or critic, since for meaning to exist one has, at some point, to choose" (Metelerkamp, "Alternatives to Tragedy" 19) reflect her impatience with Miller's slipperiness (like the sleazy greyness Miller ascribes to her "Penguin on the Beach" in the poem of the same name); Miller's failure, that is, to stand for something, yield her voice or, to speak clearly to her daughter.

For it is not enough to acknowledge that the position Miller occupies in literature, in relation to the literary canon, resists easy definition; her implication in language, and her status on the page as an effect of language, complicates the notion of her literary maternity even further. The possibility of our ever being sure of Miller's intentions (what she thinks she is saying or who she might be addressing) is removed by the fact of language's resistance to intentionality. Where she writes from (Does she write as a mother? Does she write as a woman? Can she write as either?) is, equally, a question of desire and not, as will be shown, Miller's alone.

Once we begin to speculate on the mobility of desire across and within symbolic identifications, the question of who Miller really is when she writes and what kind of authority she might possess becomes interesting only insofar as the reader's attempt to answer it, and the different answers she supplies, provide an index of her own desires. In the case of Miller as a literary mother, what we are made to realise is that literary maternity as a discourse brings with it a set of expectations, oblique or stated, that Miller's text is made to carry and that it is measured against.

The evasiveness or unsatisfactory withholdings of Miller's text could account, in part, for Metelerkamp's unenthusiastic identification of Miller as a literary mother. She is determined to harness Miller's relative visibility in South African English literature for a better cause than the liberal humanism of "the Chapman School", that much is clear, but the impulse behind her initiative, as explained in her article, remains almost entirely remedial – Miller and her poetry are recommended to the next-generation woman poet in order that she might grapple with some of the contradictions "which press upon her now" ("Ruth Miller: Father's Law or Mother's Lore?" 57).

A quick overview of Miller's correspondence and the literary scholarship surrounding her *oeuvre* suggests that Metelerkamp's qualified recommendation of her as a literary mother could derive, even unconsciously, from Miller's seemingly partisan approach to fostering emerging talent among male writers. Below, in the first of two excerpts taken from her unpublished correspondence with Jack Cope (in his capacity as editor of the South African literary magazine, *Contrast*), Miller endorses her husband's work; in the second, she puts forward for publication the writing of a male teacher at St John's College in Johannesburg.

I cannot agree with your strictures – and I'm certainly not biased – if anything I'm Willie's [Wolfe Miller's] harshest critic – I think you've missed the subtlety of the whole story. Honestly, I do! I enclose envelope for its sad return [...]" (Unpublished correspondence, 29 April, 1967)

In an insane world, therefore, am trying to keep saintly somehow. Hence the enclosed, which are by a friend – Walter Andrews, who is Senior English Master at St John's here – and whose work I think has a real talent [...]. He's a bit shy about placing his work – hence my doing it for him. (Unpublished correspondence, 5 May, 1968)

The excerpts above lend weight to the contention that, while Miller might not have limited her mentoring efforts to *young* writers, she devoted them more or less

exclusively to the guidance and support of men (the startling exception being the girls she taught at St Mary's Anglican High School where her "record", as she informed Guy Butler, was "of 100% passes in matric with all types of entrants – so that I can claim a certain success as a teacher despite lack of academic degree" (16 December 1966).

In fact, Miller's apparent lack of involvement with other women poets (whether as a reader or as a writer ["Yes, I do read Yeats, and Keats, and Lawrence, and Auden. And every other poet, old and new, I feel any rapport with, or feel I can learn from" (Unpublished correspondence with Guy Butler, 26 May 1958)] could conceivably be viewed as a failure by her aspirant literary daughters, most notably, Metelkamp herself. Metelkamp would have been made aware, through her interviews with Abrahams, of "the guidance and encouragement she [Miller] gave the younger writers she met" (including, we can assume, Abrahams himself – Miller's self-described protégé) as well as Abrahams's opinion that the warm generosity and steadfastness of Miller's faith in the value and significance of creativity was "a most attractive and nutritive quality of her personality" (13).

Even though women poets were less prominent on the whole than their male peers at that time (Miller herself excepted), it does not appear to be the case that there was no visible, emerging female talent in need of the nurturing that Miller offered Abrahams, among others. In fact, according to Lockett,

A feature of the Modern Period [which she dates from the late 1950s and early 1960s through to the 1980s] is the noticeable increase in the number of women writing poetry and being published. This was due not only to the increased motivation offered by feminist recognition of women's value as writers, but also because of the general proliferation of literary magazines that offered women an outlet for their work. (Lockett, *Breaking the Silence* 31)

The local publishing industry was dominated by men, and Lockett goes on to give credit to “Jack Cope as editor of *Contrast* [...] in the 1960s and ’70s and to Abrahams as editor of *The Purple Renoster* and *Sesame* (and Renoster books) in the 1970s and ’80s, for their willingness to publish women’s work” (30–31). They, in turn, express gratitude to Miller for her submissions. According to Abrahams, Miller “gave *The Purple Renoster* wonderful support, unlike others. She always gave me work to publish, giving me the sense that The Renoster was a worthwhile and important effort” (Alfred 110). Cope, too, in an interview with Michael Gardiner, “points with justifiable pride to the fact that *Contrast* published significant amounts of poetry by Ruth Miller” (“South African Literary Magazines 1956–1978” exhibition catalogue). Were there compelling historical or social circumstances keeping Miller from making contact with, or extending her support to, emerging women poets?

Something as seemingly inconsequential as “social and personal reticence” (Abrahams, 10) in even “slightly public” situations could have kept Miller from extending her circle of acquaintances and sphere of influence further than she did. On first meeting the Millers in 1959 at a gathering of the short-lived Johannesburg literary club, Egoli, Abrahams describes Miller hovering “silently in the background [despite her being “probably the best known name”], leaving me with an impression of large humorously observant eyes and a deer-like shyness” (11). He marvels at the change in Miller’s demeanour when he visits the couple at home: “she was very different; not shy, she had plenty to say. She was demanding to know, sometimes exhausting” (Alfred, 110).⁷⁶

⁷⁶ Joy Powell, a colleague of Miller’s at St Mary’s (who worked closely with her in the English Department), registers a similar impression: “She was a strange sort of woman. She was very pleasant but very... I think I would call her demanding”; “She was that type of person; you did things for her. She expected you to do things. Not in an unpleasant way”; “Yes, yes, she always got her own way” (Joy Powell, Personal Interview).

Lockett finds nothing remarkable in Abrahams's account of "an intelligent woman who would not assert herself in public", responding that

What was inexplicable to Abrahams may be understood by a gendered reading of her [Miller's] life. He is describing any woman of her time who was trained to be a "lady", to be silent and defer to the opinions of men in public. [...]. ("Stranger in your Midst" 191)

Lockett's generic argument, whatever its other merits, misses the particularity of the change in Miller's conduct in private conversation, for it is not simply the case that she is more confident or assertive in such situations, but that she feels no obligation to extend the ladylike codes of behaviour she supposedly observes in public to her private interactions. Any attempts at being entertaining or charming (i.e. sociable in a ladylike fashion) seem incidental to Miller's unselfconscious pursuit of personal preoccupations – anxieties, distresses, judgements – artistic or otherwise. Reading between the lines of Abrahams's description of Miller's conversation and looking over her correspondence with Guy Butler, it seems just possible that what might make her personally onerous (demanding and exhausting at times) is her unapologetic and distinctly unladylike habit of taking herself seriously.

Miller shows some awareness of what Abrahams and Joy Powell identify as her tendency towards "demanding" behaviour when she apologises to Butler in their correspondence for nagging him (22 May 1957) and worries that he might be "very busy and finding me importunate. Do please let me know if so" (8 May 1958). It is also interesting to note in passing that, however deferential and admiring Miller's tone in her letters to Butler, she is comfortable not only defending her poems against his "punctilious criticism" and contesting his artistic theories ("In fact there are few poets who spin webs 'sensitive, supple and strong', as you put it" (23 January 1958)), but also suggesting revisions to his poetry i.e. offering him advice, however

tentatively (“This is serious surgery – but I feel it would improve the whole section – the main statement would tellingly remain and Camoens would still be tellingly there. What do you think?” (Unpublished correspondence, 25 May 1968).

While the reasons for Miller’s apparent discomfort in public forums might remain complex and debatable, its practical effects do not: in combination with her professional distance from literary and academic circles (first as a secretary and then as a high school English teacher), her social reticence would have meant that any influence she exerted was likely to be limited to intense, one-on-one associations with figures she recognised in the male-dominated world of South African English literature. Another point worth noting is that almost all of Miller’s recorded associations include an aspect of reciprocity (a reflection perhaps of Powell’s observation that “you did things for her. She expected you to do things”) meaning that whatever support Miller gave emerging names like Abrahams, he was in a position to assist her too. It does not follow from this (except purely speculatively) that Miller chose not to assist women poets on self-interested grounds; if anything, it suggests that Miller was searching for some kind of authority herself and found it in the better-educated, highly visible world of male writers and publishers that surrounded and supported her.

The misgivings or reservations that emerge in readings of Miller’s work seldom relate directly to her poetic technique which, as observed earlier, is typical of the experience of modernist women writers. Critics remark on Miller’s preoccupation with death, suffering, loss and isolation, and “her bleak existential vision” (elevated to a “tragic vision” in several cases) as well as her periodic reliance on impressive-sounding practised imagery and expression. Nick Meihuizen comments in a review of Miller’s collected writing that appeared in the *South African Literary Review* (“Our

Mortal Predicaments” 1991): “But Miller is consistently ‘eloquent’, and not consistently successful. The ‘force’ which she sometimes attains, then, exists apart from eloquence” (5). In a similar vein, in his introduction to Miller’s collected writing, Abrahams writes disparagingly of what he calls Miller’s “practitioner exercises”, the majority of which

remain unpublished or uncollected [by Abrahams himself, in his role as Miller’s literary executor], but some passages and even some whole poems representing this style are to be found in *Floating Island*. The reliance here is on fancy, wit, education, cleverness. (14)

Abrahams prefers the poems that have what he calls “a stripped quality” which “goes beyond matters of diction; here, not merely the poetic mode but the poet herself is stripped, her face, her fate, her moments are directly the subject of these anguished, albeit restrained, lines” (14). Metelerkamp, too, displays limited patience with Miller’s more allusive, ambiguous work:

This is in disagreement with Easthope who, like Eagleton and Moi, is specifically anti-humanist and values the kind of poetry in which the subject position can never be fixed; but this is to value that which is equivocal, in a state of contradiction, as opposed to that which explores contradictions, and attempts to resolve them, knowing they will be followed by others. (“Alternatives” 292)

Metelerkamp’s statement against ambiguity contains an unintended meaning of its own that is cleared up only with careful rereading: who is the “they” that will be followed by others? Looked at in context, it seems it must refer to the plural noun “contradictions” that will be followed by other contradictions – the reader can be forgiven (“They will forgive...”), however, for mistakenly assuming it refers to Metelerkamp’s ideal of responsible, “humanist” writers who spare a thought for their literary heirs (and other readers still to come) by clearing up their texts for them in advance. In this regard, Miller’s poem “They” could be read as a strangely prescient

reflection on what readers like Metelerkamp (the unspecified “They” of the poem’s title) will and will not “forgive” in their literary forebears.

They will forgive the stone
If it does not strive
Through its compressed grain
To spread and come alive.

Let the clay, they say,
Remain dumb, unfired,
Not leap towards the shape
Of a stinging spire.

They will not forgive
That which would unseam
In articulate love
And the woken dream.

Miller’s inventory of what will not be forgiven in the third and final verse (“That which would unseam / In articulate love, / And the woken dream”) is suggestive of the kind of fissile, unstable material Metelerkamp is looking to tame.

For Metelerkamp, Miller’s seeming ambivalence towards the power of expression (or the value of representation and its ability to redress her feelings of loss and despair), her sense that “nothing matters” (Bason and Conolly, *Encyclopedia of Post-Colonial Literatures*, 1025), and the unchallenging nature of her poetry (her formal conservatism) ensure the insistence of her “contradictions”:

It may seem that I am contradicting myself in suggesting that the contradictions in Ruth Miller’s work are weaknesses, since I also suggest that it is precisely the presence of such contradictions which allows the reader to explore reality: to see why they exist and how they can be resolved. What I am suggesting however, is that there is no development in Miller’s work which resolves the central contradictions. They come up again and again. (“Alternatives” 293)

Metelerkamp’s exasperated tone in this passage (“They come up again and again”) is strangely reminiscent of the personal observations Abrahams includes in his

introduction to Miller's collected writing. Describing the difficulty he experiences trying to reconcile "Ruth Miller as [he] knew her personally and Ruth Miller as she was expressed in her work" – another possible contradiction – he recounts the delinquencies of her conversation:

[It] came under the pressure of her anxieties and distresses, her sometimes eccentric or dogmatic judgements, her habit of riding tangents long after they had lost their modicum of interest – and thus it displayed little of the wit, economy, elegance, perceptiveness, sensitivity and sheer cleverness that characterised much of her poetry. (12)

As I argue earlier in the thesis, the apparent brutality of the remarks quoted above could be a reflection on Abrahams's felt duty as Miller's literary executor to keep potential biographers or curious readers at a safe distance from the raw material of Miller's life by suggesting, forcefully, that in real life, Miller was a bore. It seems entirely possible that, in overstating his case, Abrahams remains blind to what a comparison of his remarks on the banal repetitiveness of Miller's conversation with Metelerkamp's on the circularity of her poetic preoccupations throws into relief, namely, the ordinary rhythms and patterns that connect Miller's life to her art. (Nothing matters in her conversation becoming nothing *matters* in her poetry?)

Confronted with the difficulty of coming "to terms with the fact that a suburb is an awkward and unlikely theater for a poem" Boland finds herself reflecting on the enforced repetitions of her life there, "the repeated action – [...] lifting a child, clearing a dish, watching the seasons return to a tree and depart from a vista" (169) before asking: "What were all these if not – as language and music in poetry were – a sequence and repetition which allowed the deeper meanings to emerge: a sense of belonging, of sustenance, of a life revealed, and not restrained, by ritual and patterning?" (170) Far from trying to elevate what Abrahams and Metelerkamp perceive to be shortcomings in Miller's conversation and poetry to a conscious

materialist aesthetic, what I am trying to suggest is that, in Miller's case, her obsessive going over of old ground with no apparent end in sight, her stallings (her reluctance to move on or to let go) and her laboured repetitions could, in fact, be located at the heart of her practice as a poet and a literary mother. It is hardly without interest that her much-regretted lack of development and constant reversion to familiar patterns of thought (also known as regression and dependence) belong to a time and a place associated with the mother and that Freudian psychoanalysis teaches us to call "the preoedipal."

Another aspect of Miller's writing and aesthetic approach that comes in for comment (at least from Metelerkamp, Abrahams, and Miller's own daughter, Pat Campbell) is her striving after perfection and apparent sensitivity to criticism. Metelerkamp counts Miller's "sense that poetic libido was necessarily male and directed toward perfection" and therefore at odds with "her roles of wife and mother" among the main contradictions of Miller's social and literary context ("Ruth Miller: Father's Law or Mother's Lore?" 57). Her treatment of what both Abrahams and Campbell portray exclusively as a personal foible of Miller's (they agree "she was her own worst critic") as a socially determined over-compensation alerts the reader to the connections between Miller's defensiveness about her untutored intellect and the perceived laboriousness of some of her poetry and conversation.⁷⁷

Certain of Miller's comments in her correspondence with Guy Butler lend weight to Metelerkamp's contention that she was incapable of reconciling her domestic arrangements with her conception of literature. Miller's amplification of what we can assume was originally Butler's metaphor of writing and architecture in

⁷⁷ The abundance of the "free, untortured" because presumably tutored intellect of the successful poet in Miller's poem "The Other Poet" is contrasted with her own swinging, empty "nets".

the excerpt below is telling in its confinement of the intellectually unserious (wordy and unschooled) to the walls of a humble domestic dwelling:

You mention the 'architectural problem.' Is it that I am too verbose, – is it that I don't know structure, stress and strain in the purely scholastic sense, – is it that what I have to say is always too slight to hold up anything but a very small cottage – and that cathedral naves are for a more intellectual approach?
(26 May, 1958)

Her misgivings with all things demotic surface in an earlier excerpt from the correspondence, quoted below, where she shows herself to be embattled by the incursions of 'dailyness' (needing "at least a no-man's land of time" to recover) into her writing:

One works all day, comes home to two large-ish children who clamour of this and that, and for this and that and then sits down to write. If it's a letter, it becomes chatty and garbled – like this one, I'm afraid. If it's a poem, it seems to need at least a no-man's land of time until the midnight hours before one's brain is receptive again. (Miller to Butler, Unpublished correspondence, 23 January 1958)

Of course, reading Miller's letters in this manner, as documentary evidence, is to take Miller at her word and to credit one genre of writing (in this case, personal correspondence) with greater authority or transparency than another (poetry). Whatever Miller's self-conscious reflections on her own writing (which are anything but garbled), Meihuizen's observation that she is "not averse to using the occasional cliché [in her poetry] in the service of an overall impression" ("Our Mortal Predicaments" 6) reflects her powerlessness in practice to prevent other kinds of writing from mixing with that material she recognised as her own. This self-diagnosed "intellectual pride, or purity" extends to questions of creative influence: "I'm pleased you don't agree with the friend who thought he saw [William] Plomer's influence in the Floating Island [...]" she writes to Guy Butler, "I should hate anyone's influence to show overtly in something of mine" (Unpublished

correspondence, 10 March 1958). Miller's stated wish to be original and her antipathy towards anyone's influence showing "overtly" in her work is best viewed in relation to Adrienne Rich's remarks on the vagaries of writing and desire: "All kinds of language fly into poetry," she cautions, "like it or not" ("A Long Conversation" qtd. in Rose, *Sleep* 48).

Equally mistaken in this regard is the impulse to quote (or treat) reported incidents as irrefutable proof of Miller's true self or tendencies. In his introduction to Miller's collected writing, and despite his own misgivings about the value of biographical detail, Abrahams uses his memories of Miller ("Ruth Miller's ghost" (10)) to license arguable editorial decisions and to lend authority to his characterisation of her artistic preferences, in this instance, her hypersensitivity to criticism and the strictness of her own standards:

An incident will illustrate her attitude. When she was preparing *Selected Poems* she asked me to read through the folder of material she had under consideration. One short poem was called "Kingfisher". It recorded the reflections of the Creator as He hesitated over the ungainly bird He had just called into existence. The final line expressed His decision: "Tut! 't will do!" Jokingly I quoted that phrase as my comment on the poem, intending, at worst, unenthusiastic approval. But this amount of reservation was unacceptable to Ruth. "Tut 't will do" would not do for her. Despite my protests she withdrew "Kingfisher" from the selection. And in fact I have not found a copy of it in her papers. (17)

Miller's daughter confirms Abrahams's impression in an excerpt from their correspondence reproduced below:

As to your comment 'Tut t'will [sic] do', I remember that she would sometimes ask one for a comment on a poem typed in the early hours (I often heard the typewriter bashing away) – if I liked the poem, well and good, if I said I didn't she would tear up the poem, – so I learned to be very guarded in my criticism, for I realised she was her own worst critic, as you say. (4 February 1986)

It does not seem to occur to either Abrahams or Campbell that Miller's intemperate response to their interventions might be read more as an index of their relation to her ["two large-ish children"] than as an illustration of her attitude towards criticism of her work in general. Similarly, Metelerkamp's perception that Miller's text withholds could be related to what Abrahams and Campbell encounter when they offered critiques of Miller's poetry, that is, that her self-conscious assumption of a daughter in relation to Miller's text might result in a bringing up of the kind of resistance Metelerkamp describes. As Janet Malcolm advises in her monograph on Chekhov:

A number of memoirists have written of Chekhov's inability to get close to anyone. One must always be sceptical of such an observation, since it can simply describe the relationship of the subject and the memoirist, and not necessarily apply to the subject's other relationships. (*Reading Chekhov: A Critical Journey*, 198)

The relationship under discussion here is not one of subject and memoirist, but of mother and child and, in Miller and Abrahams's case, metaphorical mother and child. In this instance it is the very closeness of the relation, the proximity of Miller to both her daughter and Abrahams (albeit in different ways) that seems to aggravate the already "uncomfortable" experience of being read.⁷⁸ In contrast to the recollections of Abrahams and Campbell, Miller's written responses to criticisms of her poetry from Guy Butler testify to her expansiveness and her articulate engagement with his suggestions, as well as her commitment to revising her work.

I wonder if you realise how grateful I am to you for your slating?
I am sure my images would be less clouded, less 'incompatible',
if I were fortunate enough to have criticism like yours more

⁷⁸ As Miller commented to Butler on publication of her poem "Floating Island": "I, too, was pleased that the Floating Island found a home but was disappointed in it when I saw it in print, which is always cold-blooded and betraying" (Unpublished correspondence, 23 January 1958); or, in Johnson's words: "Anyone who has ever had a book reviewed knows how uncomfortable it is to be read" (*Mother Tongues* 177).

often. [...] If you are still unsatisfied with the dichotomous poem I would be immensely grateful if you would let me know. (23 March 1957)

[...] I find your criticisms extremely helpful and constructive, and am always immensely grateful to you for them. (22 May 1957)

I quite accept your criticisms of the two poems sent you last – although will defend the Sing to me Softly one at least in part when I get the opportunity. (13 January 1958)

[...] somehow your criticisms always spark me onto something new or deeper. (5 August 1958)

The longer excerpt quoted below is from a letter Miller wrote to Jack Cope in response to his editorial comments on poems she submitted for the South African literary magazine, *Contrast*. In the letter, Miller rejects firmly, but reasonably, Cope's suggested changes to her poems with the explanation that she cannot herself "find the nub of the matter."⁷⁹ The letter provides an instructive contrast to Miller's correspondence with Butler insofar as it hints at the connection between her variable attitude to criticism and her estimation of its source.

Many thanks for your long and painstaking letter about my poems. If I appear not to have taken much note of your comments in point of factual changes – it is not that I resent the criticism (which I value) or feel it to be wrong necessarily. At times it is because I can do nothing further for the poem.

I realise I have done very little to satisfy you – either by way of alterations or explanation – but you did say you would not be insistent on changes, and I would much prefer to leave the three poems as they now stand, if you can suffer them so. You asked, by the way, for additional work – and I am enclosing another half dozen poems about which I would clearly like to have your comments. Please don't think me so intransigent that any criticism would now be wasted on me! It is just – how shall I put it – the reading of the 'moment of truth' – the awareness on the part of the critic which strikes home to the awareness of the writer, which, as you say, can 'jolt a poet into mending' what he has written. I am less than satisfied with most of the poems I

⁷⁹ In another letter to Butler, she explains that her knowledge of what is good or indifferent in poetry falls short of being able to identify "the exact fault in myself and re-make it. My knowledge, in other words, stops short of repair work" (26 May 1958).

have now included – yet cannot myself find the nub of the matter. If only it were only [sic] my ubiquitous commas alone that were the villains! (Miller to Jack Cope, Unpublished correspondence, 5 August 1960)

Pace the confident assertion of Abrahams above that “An incident will illustrate her [Miller’s] attitude [to her own writing]”, what these examples demonstrate, if anything, is the inescapable relativity of that gesture. In the case of Campbell and Abrahams, what Miller’s reaction (immediate and irreversible destruction of the offending object) suggests is that criticism from a child, or imperfection in a mother, is simply unbearable. While neither Abrahams nor Campbell openly judge Miller’s behaviour, it is clear from their faintly indulgent exchange of memories that they find it difficult to countenance. One way of looking at this would be to say that Miller’s attempt to be perfect in her “children’s” eyes is itself a failure – one that I will show has repercussions for the management of her literary legacy.

In conclusion then, however instructive Miller’s example might be for other women poets, the poetry itself appears to offer no easy feminist lessons. Metelerkamp’s unsatisfactory experience of reading Miller with what she calls a “socialist feminist” agenda in mind, demonstrates that anyone coming to Miller’s work in search of an article of faith, or certainty, is going to be disappointed. In addition, the insistence of the ambiguities in Miller’s poetry (“They come up again and again”) and the poetry’s intimation of the powerlessness of language and the frailty of identity (what Metelerkamp calls Miller’s “nihilism”) make Miller, as a literary mother, hard to follow or, to extend Metelerkamp’s earlier metaphor of nurturance, difficult to take. It is precisely the issue of the “weaknesses” (or failures) of Miller’s poetry that I am arguing open up imaginative opportunities for the reader (and aspirant literary daughters).

Metelerkamp attempts to reconcile the historically divergent words “woman” and “poet” as described above by Boland by adapting her maternal aesthetic to an ideal of maternity. What if readers were to approach her initiative from another direction, that is, what if “they” were to use the poetry to reinterpret the maternal ideal? This would mean putting back into the picture all those aspects of maternity that the maternal ideal tries to exclude: symbolisation, loss, ambivalence, death.

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Chapter Four

A point finally about the wider political resonance of this dispute. The discussions, as is well known, were staged at the height of the Second World War. The emphasis on negativity, the ambivalence about reparation (reparation as ambivalent), takes its reference from, even as it casts light on, the conflict going on all around. (Rose, *Why War?* 170)

I unpicked seams in the pillowslip, the towel, the hem of my dressing gown, and then, using my smuggled needle and thread, sewed them up again, only to unpick once more, and sew again. The repetition of these meaningless tasks and the long loneliness made me a prisoner of routines and I found myself becoming obsessional, on the constant lookout for omens. (Ruth First, *117 Days* 67)

The discussions Rose is referring to in the above quote are the so-called Controversial Discussions, “which took place at the scientific meetings of the British PsychoAnalytic Society between 1943 and 1944, centring on the disagreement between Anna Freud and Melanie Klein” (140). They are also, crucially, the record of a dispute between two daughters of Freud (real and metaphorical) over his legacy and the continuity of the psychoanalytic institution. The discussions (arguably “controversial” in South African literary circles) over Miller’s poetry and the meanings attributed to it reveal themselves equally as a dispute over her literary legacy and the boundaries of the Miller corpus (what it should and should not be allowed to take in to ensure its survival).

Like Klein, the challenge offered by Miller’s work to attempts at its revival, the unnamed “push factor” lurking behind previously cited publishing-house judgements of political irrelevance or lack of appeal for contemporary women, is not attributable to its marginal status as lyric poetry only, but more particularly, in Metelkamp’s authoritative reading, to the perceived negativity of the work’s vision. Metelkamp’s cautious nomination of Miller as a literary mother for emerging poets, especially

women poets, in South Africa, testifies to the difficulties attendant on the attempts to “save” Miller’s work from neglect by even the most determined of her literary children. While it is possible to contest the accusation of political irrelevance levelled at the Miller corpus by importing into individual poems references and allusions to issues of race and gender (as Chapman has demonstrated in his more politically attuned rereading of her poems), there is little initiative in rereadings of the poetry towards considering “the wider political resonance” (Rose, *Why War?* 170) of the “nothing” that has kept Miller’s work and her would-be literary daughters apart, namely, its negativity.

In the discussion that follows, I will try to show, taking my cue from Rose’s rereading of Klein, how the emphasis in Miller’s poetry on negativity and its “ambivalence about reparation [what Metelerkamp calls “the comfort that human history might offer in an imperfect world” (*Encyclopedia* 1025)] (reparation as ambivalent), takes its reference from, even as it casts light on, the conflict going on all around” (Rose, *Why War?* 170). It is not my intention to contest the characterisation of Miller’s poems as politically irrelevant by dredging her writing for a subtext on apartheid that moves the received meanings of her *oeuvre* “a sullen inch” (Miller, “The Dredger”); what I intend to show is how the negativity of Miller’s aesthetic, its perpetuation of ambiguity and its resistance to positive knowledge, keeps open a space of “undecidability” for her readers to enter that is created by the works’ irreducible ambivalence over the limits of representation:

The privileging of ambiguity would always appear to be an avoidance of action. Yet if undecidability is politically suspect, it is so not only to the left, but also the right. Nothing could be more comforting to the established order than the requirement that everything be assigned a clear meaning or stand. (Johnson, *World* 30)

Jacques Derrida interprets the encounter with undecidability as a responsibility to the other and the future “since it involves the struggles to create openings within which the other can appear beyond any of our programs and predictions, can come to transform what we know or think we know.” We need to remember, also, that “[r]esponsibility for Derrida is not something we simply take: we find ourselves summoned, confronted by an undecidability which is also always an opportunity and a demand, a chance and a risk” (Attridge in *Jacques Derrida: Acts of Literature*, 5). Or, in Spivak’s words: “...a merely historically contextualized interpretation might produce closures that are problematic even as they are reasonable and satisfactory... the danger to which the sovereign decision [of the historical critic] responds is undecidability” (Arac and Johnson (eds) 158).

One of the more obvious effects of the transformation imperatives of the cultural debate on Miller’s legacy is the recognition among her critics of the connection between the survival of the Miller corpus and the question of racism. In their eagerness to make Miller’s work palatable to future readers (especially in the context of a discourse on maternal nurturance) and in order to support its inclusion in a national literary canon, these critics, in one way or another, have found it necessary to clear Miller and, therefore, her work, of all charges of racism. The discussion of Anglophone liberalism below is not offered as a refutation of such claims, but as a provisional negation of the conventional account of apartheid South Africa (the black-and-white version) to which such assertions belong. This deliberate, wilful “unpicking” of a familiar narrative (what might properly be called “rereading”) is one strategy among others to lower the reader’s guard and to make her attentive to the more fugitive rhythms and patterns animating her encounter with the history of Miller’s text.

Ruth First's account (included above as an epigraph to this chapter) of entering circular time and keeping in touch with meaning through the repetition of meaningless tasks in a situation of emotional and mental privation is suggestive not only as a comparison with the ambiguous, never-finished efforts at reparation by white liberals in apartheid South Africa, but also with the negativity of Miller's writing. First's description of her Penelope-like activity of unpicking and repairing makes clear the value of loss or destruction as a pretext for the "finding" gesture of artistic creation (discontinuity and recombination) testified to in the negativity of and around Miller's work.

Miller emerged as a writer soon after the Second World War although "it is very likely that she had discovered her poetic vocation by 1940 when she married Wolfe Miller who was also a writer and in the 1960s would publish a novel (*The Man in the Background*, from Jonathan Cape)" (Abrahams, 11). Her poetry and a selection of other writings (two radio plays, a story and an essay) appeared in local English literary journals including *The Purple Renoster* (1956–1972, edited by Abrahams), *Contrast*, now *New Contrast* after its incorporation of *Upstream* in 1990 (1960 to the present, first edited by Jack Cope, a journalist and writer, for twenty years) and *The Classic* (1963–1971, edited by Nat Nakasa until 1965 when Barney Simon took over) and in local and overseas anthologies. Miller also published poems (including "South Africa Now" and "Cage"), which are not reproduced in the volume of her collected works. "South Africa Now" appeared in the democratic journal *Fighting Talk* edited by Ruth First⁸⁰ and "Cage" appeared in *The Purple Renoster*.

⁸⁰ First took over the publication of the Springbok Legion's journal in 1953 for the Congress of Democrats, a multi-racial organisation that she also helped found. She and her husband, advocate Joe Slovo, were banned under The Suppression of Communism Act (1950) and *Fighting Talk* was a banned publication. As First indicated in her memoir *117 Days: An account of confinement and interrogation under the South African Ninety-Day Detention Law* "Possession of *Fighting Talk*, which I had edited for nine years, was punishable by imprisonment for a minimum of one year" (4–5).

Her poetry, as stated before, was published in two collections: *Floating Island* (1965) and *Selected Poems* (1968).

Michael Gardiner interviewed several editors of local literary magazines, past and present, as part of his research for a catalogue compiled to accompany the exhibition “South African Literary Magazines 1956–1978” (15 March–14 April 2005) held at the Warren Siebrits Modern and Contemporary Art Gallery in Johannesburg. In his review of *Contrast*, Gardiner notes that when “describing the magazine, Cope points with justifiable pride to the fact that [it] published significant amounts of poetry by Ruth Miller” which confirms Miller’s status in South African English literature and the visibility of her work in local English literary publications at that time. Earlier in the same review, Gardiner writes:

The political and cultural climate of the early 1960s was dire. As Cope observes at a number of places in his account of the magazine, censorship, bannings, restrictions, arrests and shootings characterised the period from the massacre at Sharpeville in 1960 onwards, deep into the decade. Despite no current involvement in politics (though he had been a communist in the 1940s), Cope was listed as a ‘communist’ and banned from certain activities in the 1950s.

Cope’s characterisation of 1960s South Africa touches on the more spectacular moments of the decade (“censorship, bannings, restrictions, arrests and shootings”) and provides a broad political backdrop to the everyday experience of lives lived, as Miller’s was, in white middle-class English-speaking suburbia. In Metelerkamp’s consideration of the material factors that “impinged on her [Miller’s] poems” (“Ruth Miller: Father’s Law or Mother’s Lore?” 57) she identifies the

contradictions of Miller’s social and literary context – apartheid opposing her Anglophone liberalism; her working life as a secretary and teacher leaving little time for her poetic practice; her roles of wife and mother finding no incorporation in her sense that poetic libido was necessarily male and directed toward perfection; her admiration, from a South African, colonial perspective, for the great European Modernist poets [...]. (57)

Chapman, in a similar vein, comments that

Miller is both influenced by a so-called male world of poetry while articulating her experience through her authentic “women’s [sic] voice”. She published in a scene in which political clarity is obscured by literary concepts of liberal universalism; yet she senses her terror as a white South African woman in a decade of silence [the sixties]. (21)

The above quotes offer an informed and empathetic evaluation of Miller’s achievements as a woman poet working within (and up against) the institutional and domestic constraints of segregated Johannesburg; however, their reliance on a cluster of largely unexamined oppositions, or what Metelerkamp calls “contradictions” (apartheid/liberalism; teaching/writing; colonial/European; public/private; politics/literature; male/female) to orient their readings of Miller’s work is, I would argue, limiting.

In his review of *The Purple Renoster* Gardiner extends his discussion beyond “the usual forms of oppression that characterised the fifties and sixties” to include

what Ken Owen, journalist and editor, said in 1986 about living in the claustrophobic gentility of English-speaking middle class white South Africa: “In my experience, the taboos and bigotries of the English Establishment in those days were far more suffocating than the laws under which we suffer today.”

Owen’s remarks on the English Establishment (“a small, tight, frightened world, dominated by small, tight, frightened people” “No English Future” 82) were addressed to delegates at the English Academy’s Silver Jubilee Conference (“English Language and Literature in South African Society, 1961 to 1986”) held at the University of the Witwatersrand (4–6 September 1986) – a conference that, in the words of its co-ordinator, Gardiner, attempted “to shift the controlling influences over English from academics, educators and consumer capitalism to a wider

spectrum of South African society, in which all sectors concerned with language can claim legitimate interest.” Gardiner continues:

Despite the careful steps taken to bring together a particularly wide representation of interests, the conference’s theme, the state of emergency, the Academy’s reputation and the shooting of over twenty people in Soweto just prior to the conference, limited the range of opinion and constituency present. (English Academy Review vol. 4, January 1987, 286)

Gardiner’s observations appear in the English Academy Proceedings and they lend tacit support to some of the concerns Owen voiced earlier with regard to the insularity and narrowness of the English Establishment in previous decades.

To get a better idea of the extent of Owen’s disaffection with “the English Establishment in those days” and the terms of his critique, we can compare his conference remarks with comments he made in a *Business Day* editorial, published 16 June, earlier that same year (1986). In his assessment of the draconian emergency regulations the Nationalist government of P W Botha imposed on the country in response to continuing political instability and mass protests, Owen wrote: “South Africa is today a country without a free Press, without the rule of law, without the full protection of the courts and without the basic human rights to speak freely, to assemble, or to protest” (*These Times*, 81). Viewed together, Owen’s remarks (notwithstanding his jealously guarded outsider status as a maverick newsman) paint a damning picture of the “suffocating” “taboos and bigotries” of English-speaking middle class white South Africa in the fifties and sixties. At the same time, they could enrich materialist readings of Miller’s poetry (like those offered by Chapman and Metelkamp above) by redirecting critical attention to the political and intellectual formation of the South African “English Establishment” from the inside.

Further to this, in the first of two lectures presented as part of the Winter School programme in Grahamstown in 1999, novelist and poet Stephen Gray turns

his attention to South African academic institutions in 1974, describing them (in language as unflinching as Owen's) as "unsupportive of English-language cultural affairs and theoretically comatose" ("Poetry in progress" 7 July 1999). In his attempt to provide something of a historical "stocktaking" of English literature in South Africa, Gray goes on to relate how, in an earlier incident at a conference of the English Academy of Southern Africa, this time at Rhodes University in 1969 (the year of Miller's death), and after "an enormous amount of erudite toing and froing on the issue"

it was finally decided that at South African English-language universities English departments should not be duty bound to teach any English South African literature. The reasons were that teaching our own writers would tend to sever bonds with the motherland, weaken our dependence on their decision-making, take us off their golden standard. ("Poetry in progress")

Gray's exasperation with the "retrograde academicians" who held sway on this occasion and Owen's seemingly intemperate attack on the stifling atmosphere of English Establishment circles in the fifties and sixties give some indication of the degree of cultural cringe and narrow prescriptiveness that continued to surround the production and consumption of local English literature in South Africa at the time of Miller's death. This is not to suggest that Miller, or the writers with whom she associated, shared the academy's "retrograde" attitudes towards local English literature; in fact, as Gray points out in the same lecture, Guy Butler (among others) was intransigent in the face of the academy's recommendations, "refused to throw in the towel, and summed up ironically that nevertheless: "here is a community which is going to get a literature because their writers are determined to get it for them." He left unsaid the point that they would get it whether they liked it or not" ("Poetry in progress").

In summary then, the value of Gray's and Owen's interventions lies in their ability to jolt the reader into taking a closer look at Miller's immediate context and the "English Establishment" values that would have conditioned, in part, the social scene in which she wrote, worked, and raised a family.⁸¹ This change in focus makes possible a more sober assessment of the intellectual and political achievements of liberal English culture in South Africa at that time, one that takes into account the complexity of Miller's cultural matrix and how it would have operated "to limit perceptions and ways of thinking about the world" (Kros 30) along ideological contours that are not always easy to discern.⁸² The small question of individual guilt, Miller's (just what kind of Anglophone liberal was she?),⁸³ is displaced by a more fruitful enquiry into the limits and licences of South African liberal discourse at that time. In addition, by complicating the binary relation apartheid/liberalism that underwrites categorical remarks such as Chapman's that Miller "is no racist" ("Breaking Silences" 19); Charles Eglinton's "She [Miller] hated racialism" (Abrahams, *Miller* 27); or Metelerkamp's about "apartheid opposing her [Miller's]

⁸¹ Miller's involvement in English literary and cultural circles included her membership of the short-lived Egoli Club where she first met Abrahams; her correspondence with Guy Butler (1957–1968) and occasional correspondence with Jack Cope in his capacity as editor of *Contrast* in the sixties; her employment as first a secretary and then a high school English teacher at St Mary's Anglican School for girls in Waverley; and her residence in Bellevue (a predominantly middle-class, liberal, Jewish and English Protestant suburb in the fifties and sixties).

⁸² As Cynthia Kros observes in her book-length treatment of the shaping of apartheid discourse in the context of the Eiselen Report on Bantu Education, "The fact that it fed on the liberal discourses of the time made it hard, often, to contest apartheid ideology – especially as regarded issues pertaining to culture and language" (*The Seeds of Separate Development* 116).

⁸³ Miller's contribution of a poem to the democratic journal *Fighting Talk* edited by Ruth First could be used as evidence to suggest a more radical orientation for her liberal politics; other comments (both by and about her), like this one in an unpublished letter to Guy Butler about the possibility of organising a petition on Athol Fugard's behalf, suggest otherwise: "I am steamed up about this – perhaps because I regard Fugard's work so highly – perhaps because there seems to be nothing but arbitrariness in the action [the confiscation of Fugard's passport for four years by the South African government], this time" (27 June, 1967). The qualifying phrase "this time" suggests that Miller's attitude to apartheid authority was, at best, ambivalent.

Anglophone liberalism”, the reader is made aware of how such oppositions have functioned to close off connections (“to make certain things unequivocally clear”) in readings of Miller’s *oeuvre* that the poetry leaves “wide open” (Rose, *On Not Being Able to Sleep* 55).

Without the renegotiation of alternatives that this approach implies, readings of Miller’s text can put to one side “the possibility that there might be a discrepancy between the testimony of consciousness and the testimony of the unconscious” and effectively “forbid any reading that the author’s consciousness would not recognize” (Johnson, *Mother Tongues* 177). In fact, in their determination to do justice to Miller, such readings come to resemble the failure of imagination dramatised in the poem “The Glove Box” (discussed in Chapter One) where the daughter-speaker’s conscientious examination of a disused glove box that once belonged to her mother (“Soft-covered, padded, marked ‘Boudoir Long’ / But no price”) appears in stark contrast to the granddaughter’s renewal and transformation of the box into a gift for her own mother (“Not to be used for gloves – that was understood”).

The discussion of South African liberalism that follows attempts to preserve some of the strangeness of Miller’s text (“its own / Long, long knowledge”) as a critical resource by suggesting how her writing might be implicated in the public confusions and catastrophes of its time – and by this I mean not only the institution of apartheid in South Africa, but, perhaps more peripherally, South Africa and the world after the Second World War. I am guided in this endeavour by Johnson’s and Rose’s discussion, in separate essays, of the use of different textual strategies (deconstruction’s and Virginia Woolf’s respectively) to come to terms with the horror of war “produced as a logical extension of Western thinking” (Johnson, *World* xvii). I find their analysis particularly instructive in appreciating liberal scholarship’s

agonised relation with apartheid ideology and the destabilising effect this relation could have had on the formation of identities in a milieu like Miller's, where a growing modernist-influenced disillusionment with western civilization commingled with an exaggerated respect for all things English ("their golden standard" (Gray)).

Once I have provided some context for an approach to Miller's text that treats it as a series of renegotiations (some of them conscious, all of them provisional) with a past that both nourished and deprived her, I shall offer a reading of her poem "Penguin on the Beach" that re-views issues of literary continuity, transmission, and identity (and its immersion in unconscious desire and fantasies of projection) through the lens of Kleinian negativity.

[S]uppose there were no difference in quality of buildings etc. or remuneration of teachers etc. between African and White schools; suppose that all schools were of equal excellence and efficiency – would organisation into separate African and White schools still be 'segregation' in the bad sense? (Kros 63)

The above excerpt is taken from "a plaintive postscript to a letter" written by R.F.A. Hoernlé, Head of Philosophy at the University of the Witwatersrand, executive member of the South African Institute of Race Relations (SAIRR) and a "major figure in the intellectual formation of modern South African liberalism" (*ibid*). He is writing to the President-General of the ANC, A.B. Xuma, "to defend the neutrality of the SAIRR". The difficulties Hoernlé experienced "distinguishing between "undesirable 'segregation' and "desirable 'differentiation'" provide a startling example of how liberal ideas of self-determination and identity (culture and language) could be incorporated into the apartheid text on separate development in ways that South African liberals found difficult to refute or unpick; it is also an indication of the range of attitudes to racial equality (from the empowerment of the African intelligentsia to "full-scale assimilation") that fell under what author Ronald Roberts calls "the

amorphous overall term 'liberal' in South Africa at that time. In his biography of Nadine Gordimer (*No Cold Kitchen*) Roberts remarks:

Too little attention tends to be given, within South African political discourse, to the intra-liberal divisions that existed during apartheid. Any such attention must necessarily, for instance, elevate the reputation of Alan Paton in the 1960s at the expense of Helen Suzman, who persistently opposed ordinary black voting rights in those same years and for some years afterwards. (164)

He goes on to offer this assessment of mainstream or parliamentary liberalism's achievements during the apartheid years:

Parliamentary liberalism's active opposition to black voting rights set in motion the very treadmill of oppressive measures that Suzman as a parliamentarian then went on courageously and tirelessly – but also merely piecemeal – to oppose. These “liberals” set themselves up as Sisyphus on a steep slope of their own making. (165–166)

Roberts's use of the expression “set themselves up”, with its implications of imposture, self-deception and entitlement, is particularly suggestive here. It points to the fact that mainstream white liberals not only had the means⁸⁴ to establish themselves as the official opposition in parliament, but also the power and desire to represent, and to understand, their belated and unsystematic opposition to apartheid policies as a legitimately heroic and heartbreaking (because largely hopeless) undertaking.

The ambiguity and reflexivity of the phrase “set themselves up” resonates with a mode of representation (and self-representation) that enables and limits its practitioners at the same time, not always with their conscious awareness or

⁸⁴ Roberts could be alluding to the financial support Suzman's Progressive Party received from Harry Oppenheimer in 1959 or, more generally, to the long association liberal politics enjoyed with English mining capital in Johannesburg.

consent. In the case of South African English-speaking liberals in general,⁸⁵ it implies that if they could displace consistently their “own impotency and doubts” (McClintock 344) and lack of any authentic hope or viable alternative vision for the future onto the Nationalist state (or set the Nationalist state up), they also could not distance themselves at will from its valorisation of European (meaning white) culture without risking their way of life (their privileged set-up, in the broadest possible sense).

In other words, white English-speaking liberals might have liked to count themselves apart, but their location “[i]n that interstice [between power and indifferent and supportive agency]” (Njabulo Ndebele, 220) ensured that they were not, as Peter Stewart explains, free agents:

apartheid set up a white area or suburb as a model of civilisation *vis-à-vis* black areas and black workers and domestic servants: from the various sources of segregationist practice whites were under pressure to have a ‘civilised standard of living’, to have a distinct white carriage of the body, to engage in home-building and the economic striving that facilitated the living out of appropriate white consumption. (54)

Again the expression “set up” is used, this time to describe the pressure that apartheid discourse exerted on its white population to make years of “consciously crafted” (Keith Beavon, 95) segregation in Johannesburg (starting with the pre-apartheid Natives (Urban Areas) Act in 1923) look like the natural evolution of a city along racial lines.

Those South Africans classified as “white,” but who occupied different (and, in some cases, historically contentious) linguistic, cultural, political and economic positions, were impelled to “act out civilisation” (in their daily routines and on their bodies) and to present “whiteness” as “a source of norms and rationality, including

⁸⁵ Roberts is at pains to point out the difference between a South African (however Anglophone) liberal and an English one: “[Anthony] Sampson, a London liberal, was by no stretch a Johannesburg one, far exceeding South African liberals in racial egalitarianism” (164).

rules about how to respond to multi-racial situations” for the benefit of each other and a loosely constituted and diverse audience of what the Stallard Commission (appointed in 1922 to make recommendations concerning urban segregation) wishfully called “temporary black sojourners” (domestic workers and other migrant labourers staying and working in areas reserved for whites to satisfy “the wants of the white population”) (Stewart 54).

A range of complex identifications, all carrying their own class implications, inflected the performance of some version of “whiteness” in various contact zones (most acutely, domestic interiors). White, English-speaking South Africans

linked to European traditions but with particular colonial and political overlays. [...] The Jewish, Italian and German groupings derived more from the dynamics of Europe in the early parts of the twentieth century. Each tradition had numerous implications for lifestyle, attitudes to technical skills, and conceptions of history and society. The British tradition often carried an imperial and liberal vision. (Stewart, 52)

The point here is not simply that English-speaking liberals were implicated in the creation and maintenance of apartheid (that they were is amply testified to in Beavon’s statement that apartheid was “itself an outgrowth of the Stallard thesis” and significant pre-apartheid laws like the 1923 Natives (Urban Areas) Act, the 1930 amendment to the 1923 Act, and the Slums Act of 1934), or that they benefited from it (again, there is no shortage of evidence to show that the English-speaking population was among the most affluent groups in apartheid Johannesburg) but that apartheid discourse came to constitute, partly, their identity, in ways of which they were more or less conscious and in ways which they were more or less unable, or disinclined, to resist.

Roberts’s preface to his biography on Gordimer includes two passages that resonate with Stewart’s implicit suggestion that the effortful staging of whiteness

empowered and stunted the white population at the same time. It might be more precise, to say that it lowered their expectations of themselves (see Gordimer's comment below that "we didn't expect to understand"). The first is from an essay Gordimer wrote in 1959 in which she argued that

the setting of whites above black not only oppressed blacks but worked an insidious "cauterisation of the human heart" amongst whites, a callousness that Forster called the "officialism" of the Anglo-Indians and Franz Fanon (whom Gordimer had not as yet read) called "affective ankylosis" – a hardening of the affections like the stiffening of a joint. (Roberts 22)

The second draws on a variety of sources (an interview, letter and a published essay) and affords us a glimpse of racial segregation as lived experience:

The older Gordimer felt as though some faculty that should have come naturally to her as an infant, like the gradual ability of eyes to focus or of ears to recognise noises, was simply missing among white South Africans: "A child is born and its head is pressed into shape by its mother's birth canal, and I think the society you're part of also impresses itself forever on your mind... [I]t's produced all sorts of distortions." As a result, during her childhood, "the black men of the mines ... were to us no more than the sakabula birds with their long tails, whose calls, like the speech of the men, we didn't expect to understand. We had black nannies and servants at home, of course, of the tame canary breed, but they – in our presence, anyway – gave back a third-hand reflection of the genteel 'European' ways we ourselves had second-hand." Among these exotic blacks, Gordimer recalled, "We lived as people live in a forest among trees." (Roberts 20)

Miller's autobiographical story "Perspectives" provides an equally vivid dramatization of the sorts of "distortions" Gordimer describes above:

I know a very rude little gel, Aunt Bee had said. She never says Good-day to black people. Uncomprehendingly, the Sorry murmured. How to understand with no preliminary skirmish of explanation, that one greeted Blacks as well as Whites?
[...] Thereafter, whenever she was with Aunt Bee, she greeted passing Africans stiffly, unmanageably, her tongue becoming hard over the unaccustomed Good Morning or Good Afternoon. (Abrahams, *Miller* 166–167)

The uncomprehending closed hearts and petrified tongues of both writers' pre-apartheid childhood encounters with otherness reflects on the distance that apartheid opened up between white liberals and their desire for purposive thought and action ("Thus one cold morning we may reach awareness / Of destinations, having learned to survive / Distances immense with nothingness" (Miller "Long Journey" in *Ruth Miller* 49)). It also resounds with the question posed in Philip Larkin's poem "Dockery and Son", about where, finally, these "Innate assumptions come from?" Larkin's inconclusive reply "Not from what / We think truest, or most want to do: / Those warp tight-shut, like doors" (*Collected Poems*, 153) resonates with Miller's response to Guy Butler's critique of her poem "The Kite" (*Floating Island*): "It is not only the outside event, but also the inner conflict (Spires grow in the heart, but we cannot measure up to them)" (Unpublished letter to Guy Butler 23-03-1957). Both excerpts underscore the ambivalent because largely unquantifiable unconscious commerce that takes place between a society and the individual "head" it is supposed to "press into shape".

It is my contention, then, that the discourse of white supremacy that hardened into apartheid did not act on white English-speaking liberal South Africans as an external, limiting force, or something coming at them from the outside *only*; it could have functioned also like an internal permission, a way of being and thinking that informed and enabled their attitudes and expectations, including their response to apartheid, as liberals, from the inside. For this reason, any mention of the inhibiting effects of apartheid as a localisable force on Miller's thinking and writing, however valid, is inadequate on its own. Its bold binary logic cannot pick up the smaller

frequencies, the fantasies and ambiguous complicities (McClintock 379)⁸⁶ immanent in Miller's identity as a white woman in South Africa or, as a poet writing in English, her oppression by values to which she also subscribed, and her abjection by a culture that she also loved.

Penguin: The Saviour is another point that had me worried – but I cannot take away the capital, nor pluralize him. The overtones to the words are partly what I wanted to convey – there is a deep cynicism here which may not have come across – yet not such cynicism that it cannot embrace the belief that the fish – even tasting black, was a gift, a welcome one, given freely with a sort of obtuse love. (Unpublished Correspondence, 5 August 1960)

The above excerpt appears in an unpublished letter from Miller to Jack Cope (in his capacity as editor) and concerns the publication of Miller's poem "Penguin on the Beach" in the literary magazine, *Contrast*. Miller's response to Cope's suggested revisions to the poem shows her grappling with the ambivalent state of illusioned scepticism outlined above – a state that, on a profound level, describes the bewilderment and psychic pain of the emerging subject confronted with the trade-off of the mother's body for "the gift" of language. Kristeva's formulation of this transaction in terms of the perverse negation that maintains the Symbolic ("I know that the word is not the thing, but just the same") finds acute expression in writing, like Miller's, where "the subject cannot forget her previous existence as object" (Boland, 233). Of course, women poets, and Miller in particular, are not alone in their unequal experience of literary tradition. Boland's use of the feminine pronoun to describe this "poignant place" reflects her particular interest in the challenges faced by the woman poet in her encounter with a discourse (the literary canon in this

⁸⁶ The phrase appears in adjectival form in a discussion subtitled "The invention of the *Volksmoeder*" that explores the topic of Afrikaner motherhood in relation to nationalism. The final sentence, however, has more general application: "White women are both colonized and colonizers, ambiguously complicit in the history of African dispossession" (379).

instance) “we are obliged historically to call male” (Spivak, “Displacement and the Discourse of Women” 167).

1950s Johannesburg saw the emergence of “the first full generation of black writers in English”, the Sophiatown writers (including Lewis Nkosi, Nat Nakasa, Can Themba, Todd Matshikiza, Es'kia Mphahlele, Casey Motsisi, Henry Nxumalo and Bloke Modisane), who found in *Drum*⁸⁷ magazine an opportunity to stage a literary renaissance through the creation of a new aesthetic, or what Mphahlele called “a new kind of English”. The vibrant talent and excitement of the Sophiatown writers notwithstanding, their writing, as McClintock observes, was

ridden with ambivalence toward the august relics of a White European tradition still lingering in the schools. Educated for the most part in the English-run church schools and uneasily straddling the worlds of black and white culture, the black writer and intellectual at this time could still rub shoulders, despite official opprobrium, with some mostly liberal and mostly English whites. This ambiguous situation, which set these writers entirely apart from the later Soweto generation, left a mark on their writing and on their notions of aesthetic value. The governing paradox of their situation was that the aesthetic that they fashioned with passion and difficulty was shaped not only by their own desires but also by the fact that the Sophiatown intelligentsia became at that time the last real battlefield on which the English and the Afrikaners fought for sway over the cultural values of the black intermediate class. (332–333)

These black writers, like the woman poet in certain ways, suffered “conflicts of allegiance and aesthetic value” and sought permission to write from a literary tradition whose political power seemed to depend increasingly on that tradition’s deferential perpetuation by a carefully groomed colonized elite.⁸⁸ While it is true that

⁸⁷ *Drum* was launched by Jim Bailey in 1951 under the editorship of Anthony Sampson and later, Sylvester Stein. It was the first magazine of its kind written by black journalists which included some short stories and poems by black writers.

⁸⁸ “[...] Rich has demonstrated that, after the industrial turmoil of the 1920s, liberals were more or less consistently concerned with the cooption of the African intelligentsia, which distinguished them most clearly from nationalists such as Eiselen, to whom the idea of singling out the elite in this sense was anathema” (Kros, 68).

the liberal dream of a universal artistic vision was effectively crushed by the Nationalist state and its arsenal of increasingly restrictive legislation and forced evictions (starting with Sophiatown in 1955), it is also the case that white English-speaking liberals were unclear about exactly what kind of multi-racial future they envisaged for South Africa at that time.

Liberal writer Anthony Delius noticed that the National Party ideologues were incorporating liberal ideas into a 'darker' tapestry of their own ideology, and argued that much of their success lay in their ability to touch the right chords of 'freedom'. Against the National Party's powerful ideological onslaught Delius found the liberals pathetically ill-prepared. (Kros 112)

Gordimer's impressions of the Multiracial Conference she attended at the University of the Witwatersrand in December 1957, and recorded in a letter to Anthony Sampson, reflect the limitations of the liberal vision suggested above, however facetiously:

I think that all the whites, liberals, Race Relations, church people, Black Sash, and the rattle-taggle of well-meaners understood for the first time that a multi-racial society can never be the hand-out from the whites that they've always visualised. [...] *Listening, I came to the conclusion that much white "liberalism" here is a sort of great-aunt of empire-building, lingering on long after her time, poor dear. It comes 'ard to these – on the whole – decent, nice people to find that they aren't being asked to plan a new world in SA, after all.* (Roberts 166, his italics)

Gordimer's comments also point to the beginnings of a shift in political and aesthetic values away from the Sophiatown writers of the early fifties (whose self-consciously literary style was by no means representative of all black writing in English at that time) to a generation of Soweto poets subjected to the deprivations of Bantu Education (the Bantu Education Act 1953; the Extension of University Education Act 1959) and emphatically removed, both spatially and ideologically, from liberal

English influences. If the Soweto poets' writing, with its strong oral and political focus and its ignorance of Western tradition, bore the marks of what M.K. Mafane calls a policy of "cultural malnourishment", it could be argued, as McClintock suggests, that the "pre-Soweto generation, nurtured on what now seemed an artificially literary eloquence, had suffered a different form of cultural malnutrition". In Sipho Sepamla's words: "I would have liked to have been fed on Mphahlele, La Guma, Themba, Nkosi. I would have liked to have laid my hands on the 'unrewarding rage' of Richard Wright, James Baldwin, LeRoi Jones..." (McClintock 340).

We can assume, despite conspicuous gaps in the accounts of Miller's educational background⁸⁹ that, like Sepamla, she too was "brought up on Shakespeare, Dickens, Lawrence, Keats and other English greats" (McClintock 340) who she then also went on to teach as a high school English teacher at St Mary's School.⁹⁰ Despite her being a mother-tongue speaker of English and a custodian of a cultural tradition in her capacity as a teacher, Miller, as a woman poet, suffered her own kind of bewildering "cultural malnutrition". As a discourse, the English tradition brought with it all kinds of authoritative assumptions about literature and culture, including the Nietzschean distinction between Apollonian form and Dionysian

⁸⁹ Abrahams's statement in his introduction that "From other sources it is known that she went to school at St Pius' Convent in Pietersburg" (11) is supplemented with information from Pat Campbell in a letter to him: "Her [Miller's] father, incidentally, was an Irish Jew and after he deserted my grandmother, she made a living working as a governess in people's homes, and my mother did not attend formal school until she was 10 years old" (9 November 1990).

⁹⁰ Joy Powell, a junior colleague of Miller's in the English Department at St Mary's in the sixties, attributes a greater role to Miller at the school: "That's when I went to St Mary's [January 1962] and Ruth was already... she was more or less, sort of, Head of the English Department. Sister Viola [...] was, I suppose, strictly speaking, Head of the English Department, but to all intents and purposes, Ruth was. Because she was always in the staff room with us, you know" (Personal interview, 19 May 2009).

instinct, which had the power to poison writers as outwardly diverse as Miller and Lewis Nkosi against their own work.⁹¹

Yes, I do read Yeats, and Keats, and Lawrence, and Auden. And every other poet, old and new, I feel any rapport with, or feel I can learn from. But my poetic illiteracy is as intransigent as granite. I know what is wrong – often only after I am told by Butler! – but I do eventually know. But I feel the great ones don't teach me – they only underline my own failings. You mention the 'architectural problem.' Is it that I am too verbose, – is it that I don't know structure, stress and strain in the purely scholastic sense, – is it that what I have to say is always too slight to hold up anything but a very small cottage – and that cathedral naves are for a more intellectual approach? I say I know what is wrong, and then ask a spate of questions, disproving it. But what I mean is that I know with my instinct – with the feeling for poetry which makes me say of another poet – that is good, or that is indifferent – but I don't know it seems, with the sense that can pounce on the exact fault in myself and re-make it. My knowledge, in other words, stops short of repair work. (26 May 1958)

It is also worth mentioning that, although there is no reason to believe that Miller's primary and high school education was inferior, her lack of tertiary training almost certainly exacerbated the feelings of inadequacy that surface in some of her poems and, more combatively, in these later extracts from her correspondence with Butler:

Seriously – my record at St Mary's has been of 100% passes in matric with all types of entrants – so that I can claim a certain success as a teacher despite lack of academic degree. (16 December 1965)
I have NO academic qualifications bar a matric (JMB) passed a hundred years ago. [...] The reaction you mention against people minus letters after [their] name certainly didn't apply with [the nun in charge at St Mary's] – and my only hope of a teaching post is obviously in a private school (Anglican or Catholic) where they are not usually so adamant [sic] on this score. (28 February 1966)

It will not have escaped the reader's attention that the phrase "cultural malnutrition" has been central to the discussion of Miller, the Sophiatown writers and, more marginally, the Soweto poets, explored above. In each instance, it would be a

⁹¹ "Probably more than any other black writer of that time, Nkosi's taste for black writing was soured by his fidelity to European literary standards; measured by these, the black scene, as he saw it, quite desperately lacked 'any significant and complex talent'" (McClintock 334).

simple matter to detect in their relation and relating to a particular cultural past nothing but the top-down, coercive and exclusionary workings of a powerfully hegemonic discourse (in this case, English literature); however, as Miller's comments on her poem "Penguin on the Beach" suggest ("the fish – even tasting black, was a gift, a welcome one, given freely with a sort of obtuse love") the process of nourishment or transmission implicated in each example is more complicated than such a vertical relation indicates.

Miller's generous and tender description of the fish that tastes "black" as a "welcome gift" invokes a relation of self and other that includes unruly elements like love, desire and passion, which, in André Green's formulation, "always makes action morally equivocal" (Phillips in Kohon (ed) 171). The expression "welcome gift" also brings to mind the idea of a threshold state (the arrival of subjectivity through language, perhaps), to which I shall return later. For now, I should like to concentrate on what at first sight appears to be an odd combination of ideas in Miller's description, namely, those of the spoiled gift and its glad receipt. What kind of relation, at once deeply cynical and generous, is Miller asking us to imagine?

On one reading (the one that Miller's comments in her letter to Cope seems to suggest most immediately) the poem could constitute a dramatisation of that historical moment when the woman poet (the castaway manikin) tries to negotiate a more tenable position for herself in a literary tradition that authorises her effacement inside the poem (as erotic object) and without (as honorary male poet) but to which, just the same, she feels indebted. Boland outlines the complexity of the woman poet's position in relation to a tradition that both sustains and dispossesses her below:

Unlike a poet such as Adrienne Rich, to whom I feel so much indebtedness, I believe the past is the profound responsibility of the

woman poet, as it was of the romantic and modernist poets in their time. She did not make it, and Adrienne Rich, more than any poet in my lifetime, has had the courage to address this. Nevertheless, if the woman poet makes a new custom and a different sign, she is not, by that process alone, free of her engagement with the old signs. *She must renegotiate a position with the poetic past which is appropriate to her project and faithful to her imaginative freedoms. But which also is generous to that past and delicate in manner to the spirit of a tradition which sustained her.* (235, italics my own)

In this reading, the penguin is being made to stand for something, to represent the plight of the woman poet. Another reading, one I hinted at above, might see the penguin as the infant of the Kristevan preoedipal engaged in ambivalently negating the loss of the mother through its gradual, never complete, accession of symbolic function. (Can Miller not make the “Saviour” plural and lower case owing to its implication in the powerful and authoritative discourse of the Name of the Father?) Before I explore either of these interpretations further, I would like to consider the issue of representation (what the reader wants the penguin to stand for, what she wants Miller to stand for) and its relation to the intentionality of language in a poem that instructs the reader to “Watch him [the penguin] step into the waves” – an instruction that could be taken as an invitation for the reader to identify with the speaker(s) of the poem and to get caught up in what can only be called, given the forcefulness and exorbitance of certain strategies employed by the poem, the spectacle of representation.

The reader expects the penguin to stand for something (to represent, signify, symbolize, imply, or mean something), to be a figure, a metaphor, to *stand in* for something else. Even if the poem is read, simply, as a fable, a morality tale for a post-industrial age, it is figuratively complex: the penguin might be taken to represent, among other things, the defiled “silent” landscape (“He stands / In pained and silent expostulation”), or humankind’s progressive reduction of animals and the

concomitant reduction of man himself to an isolated unproductive and consuming unit – in the poem’s title, the noun “Penguin” appears without a definite or indefinite article, making the penguin generic, representative of a whole class or group: every penguin, every animal, everyman.

The explicit comparison of the penguin to “a manikin”, which denotes, among other things, a little man, dwarf or child, and the poem’s attribution of human behaviour and form to the penguin (its anthropomorphism) suggest that the poem could belong “to the old tradition, whereby a person is portrayed as an animal so as to reveal more clearly an aspect of his or her character” (Berger *Selected Essays*, 268). A manikin is, also, a model of the human body, or part of the human body, used in the teaching of medicine or art; this, together with the fact that “manikin” is an alternative spelling for mannequin, makes it reasonable to assume that the penguin is some kind of model (a representation, or a representative form) on display for the reader’s instruction and, possibly, her entertainment.

Instead of everyman, then, the poem puts the character and behaviour of a particular type of man (one who is like a penguin) on show (“Watch him”): small in stature (which has moral, intellectual, physical and general developmental implications), he is a creature of persistence (“He stands”) and habit (“An involuntary shouldering off of gleam”); a hidebound traditionalist (“His senses / Are clogged with experience”) and a plodder (he is flightless and without levity) who is, by definition, a misfit. (What, finally, is the penguin’s “own element”? The epithet “Stranger in his own element” is complicated, or at least, historically inflected by the penguin’s classification as a flightless bird that is highly adapted for swimming. It could be argued that the latest disaster, the oil spill, compounded a process of estrangement, called evolution, that began millions of years ago.)

The poem's dramatisation of the penguin's sense of alienation and disaffection, its allusion to his stunted intellectual and/or moral development, to his pomposity (the phrase "downy shirt front" calls to mind the informal expression "stuffed shirt") and to his phobic attitude to change ("He shudders now from the clean flinching wave") indicates, most obviously, a postcolonial reading with the penguin standing in for a caricature of a type familiar to the South African reader: the English colonial settler. The poem's representation of the penguin is, at times, both ridiculous and absurd (he "[w]addles in his tailored coat-tails", "slides and slips on the wet sand", "stands / In pained and silent expostulation", "shudders [...] from the clean flinching wave"). In Eglington's words: "Her [Miller's] penguin is comic, and sad because he has been fouled by the sleazy, grey "commercial stain" of oil" (Abrahams, *Miller* 23).

There is something odd about the poem's tone; for all its use of distancing effects (spectacle and rhetoric) and its suggestibility to different interpretations (depending on the discursive orientation of the reading, the penguin could be made to stand for reactionary responses to a range of different instances of historical transition or institutional challenge, including feminism and deconstruction) there is a closeness (something familiar and dense) about the poem's representation of the penguin which makes knowing how to interpret it (take it) difficult for the reader ("it tastes black") without her also feeling "taken in" (implicated in, and, possibly, misled by, the representation) herself.

What seems to be at stake in the poem, and at the source of the reader's hesitation, is the poem's representation of closeness (proximity) and contact (contiguity) as something that threatens to abolish or, in Kleinian terms, "devour" separate identities. The poem's depiction of the effects of the oil spill on the penguin

in his encounters with his surroundings (the sea, the sand, the hands) suggests contact as something obscure and inhibiting (“Sleazy, grey, / It clogs the sleekness”) and abysmal (“it tastes black”). The insolubility of oil in water, their incompatibility, makes plain the cause of the penguin’s particular horror (he shudders twice in the course of the poem): it is not, apparently, the mixture of the two substances that he finds intolerable but the memory of their proximity, their relation (“Oil on sea”) that he returns to in the most vivid terms (“Green slicks, black lassos of sludge / Sleeving the breakers in a stain-spread scarf”). The poem’s use of oxymoron, its bringing into contact (commerce) two words (“deep” and “commercial”) that ordinarily oppose each other, to describe the stain (with its implications of both physical and moral taint) left on the penguin by the oil spill, demonstrates the contaminating effects of proximity and juxtaposition on meaning.

This reading locates a “strangeness of relation that keeps on happening” so that the reader feels “drawn in and unassimilated at the same time” (Boland 93) in the poem’s seeming ambivalence over the acts of interpretation and identification (a “taking in” of words that might also take the reader/the writer in, like the sea took the penguin in i.e. incorporate them in the poem and mislead them) and its failure to fix finally the co-ordinates of a negativity that both mobilises and inhibits symbolic traffic. And the problem with negativity, as has been suggested previously, is precisely the question of its location. The Kleinian concepts of the founding status of the bad object and a negativity that comes from the inside make negativity constitutive of symbolic capacity. In other words, negativity (loss and repudiation) is not some avoidable downside to subjectivity; it is at the heart of subjectivity, “its element”, that makes strangers of us all. This emphasis, the one that remembers Oedipus as the

original “castaway manikin,” is missed in a moral reading, or any reading based on a theory of voluntarism.

I began this analysis by stating that the reader expected (wanted might have been more accurate) the penguin to stand for something. Thereafter, I suggested, very briefly, a workable approach to the poem, one that the text would support and that was sufficiently schematic to accommodate a number of related readings that would trace in the poem the contours of a complex and agonised relation between two identifiable but inter-implicated entities or discourses: man and animal; coloniser and colonised; literary humanism and feminism or deconstruction. This list of differently compelling readings, offering their own satisfactions and problems, is not meant to be either comprehensive or dismissive; its inclusion here is motivated solely by the shared preoccupation and fascination of each discursive pairing with the topic of representation. I would argue that it is only by considering the poem’s use of representation and representational frames that the reader can begin to make a connection between the poem’s ambivalent image of the penguin and her own difficulties with how to take it (the poem).

In his essay “Why Look at Animals?” John Berger comments on the progressive marginalization of animals through their transformation, by man, into spectacle in public zoos and picture books. He puts forward the thesis that the widespread reduction of animals to “the always observed” and to “objects of our ever-extending knowledge” has become an index of man’s power, “an index of what separates us [people] from them [animals]. The more we know, the further away they are” (267). The poem’s representation of the penguin seems to confirm Berger’s assertion that the more we focus on animals, the more they disappear: it makes a spectacle of the penguin (draws attention to him) and it silences him.

The poem is written in the simple present (the exceptions occur in lines 3–4, written in the present perfect, and line 14, written in the simple past), which, together with its abrupt enjambments and rhetorical flourishes (“froth”), gives the lines a dramatic appeal and immediacy reminiscent of commentary written to accompany and enliven visual displays or documentaries: something is unfolding in front of the reader’s eyes. The poem’s regular use of intensifiers (“own”; “too”; “so”), adjectives and adjective pairings (“sleazy” and “grey”; “pained” and “silent”; “clean” and “flinching”; “wary” and “sad”), alliteration (“slides, slips on the wet sand / Escaping to dryness, dearth) and enjambments (within and between stanzas), and its preference for dense expression (compound nouns and adjectives, adverb and adjective combinations, polysyllabic words), slows or “clogs” the syntactic current and the poem’s forward motion (it “turns and plods” at times), creating an effect like suspense. The poem’s arrangement into eight three-lined stanzas is, also, episodic.

Stanzas two, three and five do not so much follow the previous stanzas as take over from them, pushing them into the background, like the disembodied hands that “push him [the penguin] back into the sea”. The reader’s attention is directed to certain words, phrases and clauses isolated by the enjambments within stanzas (“Sleazy, grey”; “He shudders”; “His senses”; “He eats”) and in the transitions from one stanza to another (“Oil”; “Far too well”; “He stands”). The poem’s structure makes “strangers” (a spectacle) of these words; they are left stranded (“on the beach”) and the reader is obliged to give them full value in lines where ordinary syntax would have assigned them a less prominent role.

The closeness of the relation enjoyed by acts of representation in general and the more specialised exercise of transforming (reducing) someone or something (“the castaway manikin”) into spectacle (making him ridiculous or abject) is

immanent in both the content of the poem and the manner of its writing and serves to confirm the well-documented understanding of representation as a powerful and compulsive act of separation (commonly expressed as the desire “to put some distance between us and them”) through a show of incorporation (a “taking in” that is also a “taking out”, an elimination).

The reader, despite her hesitation, is implicated in the poem’s marginalization of the penguin: she identifies with the poem’s speaker (or speakers, the enjambments can sound, at times, like a series of rival voices interrupting each other) and follows his/their lead in speaking for the penguin (albeit, possibly, with good intentions) and in making the penguin the centre of her attention (making him into a spectacle, the “looked at”). In fact, in her response to the text, the reader bears more than a passing resemblance to the hidebound penguin she identified from his description in the poem: among other things, and as I mentioned earlier, she shares his wariness of contact and closeness, the slide and slip of signifiers whose contiguity and proximity not only clog or impede her attempts to make sense of the text but which also push her into symbolic circulation and exchange with the poem (take her in) in ways she cannot “take in” (understand and identify with).

The more time the reader spends on the poem, the greyer its intentions become (“Sleazy, grey, it clogs the sleekness”). It is not just the case that the meaning of the poem becomes more complex the more the poem is analysed; the problem with the poem, its greyness, is more precisely one of tone, that is, the more the reader studies the poem, the more difficult it is for her to know how to take it. We are returned to questions of the poem’s guardrail: the text’s intentionality (does it mean any one thing?), the poet’s intentions (is she trying to say something and if so,

what is she trying to say? Does she know what she is saying?), and the reader's intentions (how is she taking in what is being offered? What is she taking in?)

Is the poem pointing to a problem with figurative language, poetry, as disguise and distortion (froth, slickness, sludge)? Is this critique reserved for poetry or language in general? Is the penguin a travesty, a transvestite (stranger in his own element, a disgraceful imitation); is the poem a travesty, is all language and representation a travesty?

The poem's opening line ("Stranger in his own element") announces the penguin's predicament: his forced estrangement from the sea and his distress at being made to feel alien in what was his "element" (his most favourable environment or the situation in which he flourished). The idea that the penguin has become forcibly estranged from the sea is not, however, the only one accommodated by the first line. Another reading could argue also that the penguin is now stranger (more of a spectacle) in his own element (water) than, it is implied, elsewhere. The absurdity of his appearance on the beach (in his tailored coat-tails) and his awkward performance there (he "waddles", "slides" and "slips") make plain the aberrance of the situation in which he now finds himself.

A complementary reading of the phrase "Stranger in his own element" could suggest that the penguin is, by definition (self-definition?), a stranger, who is only now "in his own element". In other words, the penguin as stranger is in his element, at his happiest, or his most effective, in extremis, the situation in which he now finds himself. This interpretation gains support from the second and third lines where the depiction of the penguin's insouciance, his waddling "in his tailored coat-tails", blunts the reader's sense of moral outrage with its suggestion that the penguin's predicament has served to confirm what he has always suspected: that he is

different, a stranger, a castaway manikin (a so-called penguin, nearly a man) whose predicament leaves him feeling “triumphantly sad”. In this reading, the penguin’s strangeness is an intimate affair, a state of being that is presented to the reader at the start of the poem without explanation or origin.

The problem with all of this, of course, is that the mobility of signifiers, their tendency to come into contact and to combine with other signifiers to create meaningful and meaningless chains (that let sleekness slide into slickness) is not some avoidable downside to language, it is the heart of language, “its element”. The penguin is not a casualty of the oil slick; the penguin is a “sea-casualty”. The suggestion in the poem has always been that the sea itself (his element) is not to be trusted, that the penguin is not escaping to clean land, but to dry land, higher ground, “dryness, dearth”. The penguin is losing his faith, his passion. He is losing what in ordinary terms might be expressed as his appetite for life.

There is a sarcasm in that “Far too well he must recall the past to be so cautious” suggesting that the speaker of the poem is not entirely “taken in” by the penguin’s fantasy of the past or, at least, she does not mistake it for reality (which does not, of course, detract from its meaning for the penguin). The speaker’s sarcasm is not dismissive of the penguin’s fantasy but it might be dismissive of his lack of imagination. A moral reading might suggest that the penguin’s experience is a tragedy; another kind of reading sees that it is a travesty.

The poet/critic is, by definition, a stranger in her own element. As Kristeva observes: “To work on language, to labour in the materiality of that which society regards as a means of contact and understanding, isn’t that at one stroke to declare oneself a stranger/foreigner [étranger] to language?” Is this the speaker (can we identify just one?) of the poem who, like the penguin, eats but is not filled (fooled)?

The penguin eats critically, faithlessly (does the one imply the other? Is a critical attitude a faithless one? Miller might prefer “cynically”). This is a subtle rejection, more like a deferral of rejection. Is it negation or scepticism, or both? Perhaps it is an acknowledgement that what’s being offered is not good enough but that it’s also the only thing, in the circumstances, that is good enough. Is this the response of the reader to Miller’s poetry – she takes it in but is insistent that she is not taken in by it, that she is sceptical, withholding (instead of withstanding, enduring) that she is holding back, almost separate?

The poem portrays experience as disillusioning or, it portrays disillusioning experience only as significant or meaningful. The idea that negative experience only is meaningful, and that experience is negative in order to be meaningful, comes very close to Rose’s reading of Kleinian negativity (as it is expressed in papers prepared by some of Klein’s followers for the Controversial Discussions). The poem is concerned in the main not with unmediated experience (it cannot entertain the thought of experience without mediation) but with the way experience is read and therefore misread, the travesty of lives (and there are no exceptions) lived in terms laid down by a misapprehension.

Is it possible that the penguin stands for a history of representation, the indispensability and the intolerableness of it, representation as a miracle and an ordeal? Is this the problem Miller is articulating when she says in her letter to Cope that however deep the cynicism expressed in the poem, it still embraces the belief that the fish “was a gift, a welcome one, given freely with a sort of obtuse love”? The gift of symbolisation (what Klein calls the uncertain miracle of symbolisation), the mother’s giving of the sign in place of her body.

god who gave such ordinary women

such grief such weight of pain
that Sisyphus-wise they must bear it
uphill each day!

Isn't it just possible that, in her writing, Miller was returning, dazed and determined, to the place of loss, picking the scar, re-entering the hollow, untying the knot, and finding in the endlessly repeatable, piecemeal activity her only reward, her only pleasure: the drive to repeat, to revisit, not to let go.

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