

The poetry of Ruth Miller: the Word and her words

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ABSTRACT

This dissertation analyses a selection of Ruth Miller's poetry collected in *Floating Island* (1965), *Selected Poems* (1968) and previously uncollected poems included in the posthumous collection, *Ruth Miller: Poems, Prose, Plays* (1990) edited by Lionel Abrahams. It extends and argues against the most recent readings of Ruth Miller proposed by Joan Metelerkamp (1991 and 1992). Metelerkamp suggests that previous criticisms of Miller, focusing exclusively on her modernist intent, ignore Miller's role as a woman living in a society dominated by patriarchal authority; an authority that is informed by the Judeo-Christian tradition. This dissertation extends Metelerkamp's observation, showing how the existential crisis that is made manifest in Miller's poetry is generated by both her compliance with and denial of this patriarchal Judeo-Christian meaning-making system. It also registers a changing development in Miller's poetic trajectory from her earlier to her later poems. Metelerkamp's criticism of Miller's poetry has not recorded this development, allowing for the overall pronouncement that her poetry registers only loss and shows no conscious signs of negotiating the patriarchal system in which she is entrapped. In contrast, the conclusion of this dissertation points to elements in Miller's later poetry that suggest the development of Miller's voice as well as indicating Miller's recognition of her own compliance and desire to break with patriarchal authority.

CHAPTER 1

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. The same was in the beginning with God. All things were made by him; and without him was not any thing made that was made. In him was life; and the life was the light of men. And the light shineth in darkness; and the darkness comprehended it not. (John 1: 1-5, *The Holy Bible*)

So begins John's Gospel and account of creation. So also begins my account of Ruth Miller's poetry.

The Word equates with the defining, creative authority of both Old and New Testament narratives. The Word is made manifest to man and through man, it is the mouthpiece of biblical meta-meaning.

In the Old Testament the Word conveys creative authority as well as divine communication; God's word was not only the medium of communication with men, but what God said had creative power. In the New Testament this conceptualisation is extended by John in the Gospel and the Word or Logos becomes incarnate in the man, Jesus Christ of Nazareth (Cross and Livingston, 1997).

Man, in the true single sexed sense of the Word, has a monopoly on biblical meaning. How does Ruth Miller exert her own creative authority and make her own meaning under the extensive shadow cast by Judeo-Christian meta-narratives?

Ruth Miller's poetic vision is situated in the public space and time of Apartheid South Africa in the 1960s, it is also situated in the personal space and time characterised by bereavement (her son's death at the age of fourteen), estrangement (from her father and husband) and breast cancer to which she succumbed at the age of

fifty in 1969. Her creative consciousness matured before the women's liberation movement embarked on the project of exposing the authoritative meta-narratives that govern society. However, Miller's attitude to prevailing systems of meaning making in society and her feelings generated from living within this society are not foreign to the post-Millennial (and post-Feminist) present. The analysis of her poetry has a place in our time, if only in deconstructing the authority of God the Father and the Word, an authority that so fuelled and consumed Miller's creativity.

Joan Metelerkamp (1991 and 1992) has provided the most contemporary criticism of Ruth Miller's poetry, reconstituting traditional readings of Miller and gaining new depth and insight into her work. Interpretations of Miller's modernist concerns (primarily undertaken by Michael Chapman, Charles Eglington and Lionel Abrahams) have been questioned, opening the way for Metelerkamp's recent feminist criticism.

In her essay 'Ruth Miller: Father's Law or Mother's Lore?' (1992), Metelerkamp articulates a tension in Ruth Miller's poetry that manifests in contradictory voices of authority. It may be argued, she suggests, that Miller's desire for formal and ideal perfection is indicative of the shadow cast by the authority of the father's law.

Metelerkamp's definition of "father's law" incorporates conceptions of the dominant and authoritative influence of masculinity, of Verwoerd's law during the 1960s, of the literary authority that espoused formal perfection (encapsulated by her literary forefathers towards whom Miller aspires) and of the omniscience of the male. At one and the same time as Miller speaks with and to this voice (the authority of the father), she is unable fully to submit to this "law" and her poetry shows elements of resistance, particularly her later poems, though most of these elements are subliminal and unconscious. The authority of the mother's lore is responsible for this subversion. Metelerkamp asserts that the tension manifest in Miller's poetry is a result of an

internalised male figure pitted against instinctual forces, the tension between Miller's words and the Word (the law of the father) she aspires towards. Miller's perceived failure of her words to reach this ideal reduces her life to one of meaninglessness as she falls into "her trap of hankering for the lost word" instead of "revelling in quotidian poetic language's difference from the Word" (1992: 67). Miller's words and the Word can thus never achieve synchronous harmony, as the patriarchal-dominated truth Miller aspires towards is not the truth of Miller's existence.

Metelerkamp demonstrates her argument through close analysis of Miller's poem, 'Cycle'. (I will provide my own extensive analysis of this poem in Chapter 2 of my dissertation.) Miller, says Metelerkamp, strives in her poem 'Cycle' to come to terms with her son's tragic death whom she idealises by according him a "quasi Christ-like status" (1992: 58). His death is not only a personal loss, but becomes a larger-than-life loss of meaning. Miller seeks some sort of comfort for and restoration of the loss of meaning through her words, her poetry and the Word - the "Law of the God of the Old [and New] Testament" - fails her as "she never fully accepts the comfort that it might offer" (1992: 58). Metelerkamp on analysing the import of 'Cycle's' symbolism says: "The emblem of the tree is emblem of the poet's loss as well...It is also the tree of crucifixion, emblem of the mother's pain (she is the tree to the son's leaf) and of her abandonment both by the son and by God" (1992: 59). Miller is unable successfully to mourn because of this identification with her son, meaning and ultimately God. Her self is confronted with non-being. Her son's presence gives her meaning and without this logocentric assurance, life becomes unbearable. Miller's idealist construction of her son, the appropriation of the law of the father and the consequent failure of this law to provide consolation, form the context from which this poem, and indeed much of Miller's poetic, is generated.

Though Metelerkamp recognizes the gap between Miller's words and the Word and expands on the resulting tension of this dynamic in Miller's poetry, she fails to articulate a necessary extension to her argument. Metelerkamp identifies the perfect ideal as "the Word", suggesting the Word of God or the words of the scriptures, though she never extends her analysis to make this parallel overt. The law of the father that Metelerkamp says Miller so desperately wants to appropriate (regardless of the angst it generates) is, I would like to suggest, ultimately the Law of the Father in Heaven, the Law of the male God. Miller's poetry becomes ambivalent as it both aspires towards and resists the Law of the Father. It is within this conflicting space that I seek to place Ruth Miller's poetry, the chasm between her words and the Word which cannot be bridged, the collapse of systems of meaning and the absence of alternative structures of meaning, particularly in her earlier poetry. Ultimately, Miller's words (as will be demonstrated in Chapter's 2 and 3) provide a testament to the failure of Testaments both Old and New.

Miller's poetry is abundant in religious motifs and metaphors. She is deeply concerned with the questions that underlie religion. Lionel Abrahams, in his introduction to the recent collection of Ruth Miller's work, *Ruth Miller: Poems, Prose, Plays* (1990), says of her religious sentiments:

...despite her immersion, at the convent in Pietersburg and at St Mary's school where she taught, in a Christian atmosphere, despite her frequent allusions to deity, my impression is that she, like Wolfe, was a humanistic liberal, and, in her religious outlook, essentially an ironic agnostic: the God she reflected on, played and argued with, was no almighty and transcendent Creator, but a remote and inconsistent epiphenomenon, powerless in the main to intervene between man and his fate. (1990: 15)

Abrahams identifies Miller's pre-occupation with Christian doctrine and describes her poetic vision as "ironic". Indeed, Miller speaks into being the authority of the Word only to subvert it time and time again. However, I do not think the God she conceptualised was as "remote" as Abrahams suggests. Metelerkamp in her thesis *Ruth Miller and the Poetry of Loss* (1991) writes, "The influence of this Catholic education can be seen in more than one way in her poems; they are full of Christian references yet at the same time register Miller's agnosticism" (1991: 1). Miller insists time and again on locating meaning in the Law of the Father, regardless of her derisive attitude towards it. This insistence is the origin of her unabating sense of loss and angst. This Law, by its very definition, denies Miller's right to a meaningful existence, by deriding her femininity and in so doing destabilizing her sense of self while allowing for psychic alienation.

Judeo-Christian belief systems name God solely with male designations. Women are called on to believe and honour a male saviour sent by a male God whose legitimate representatives can traditionally only be male. Accordingly, maleness is an essential character of divine being.

Mary Daly, leading radical feminist philosopher, provides a critique of sexism in the Christian tradition in her books *The Church and the Second Sex* (1968) and *Beyond God the Father* (1986). In her analysis of women and religion in *Beyond God the Father* she says the exclusively masculine symbolism for God, for the notion of divine "incarnation" (male Christ-image) in human nature and for the human relationship to God (the holy trinity and the female figure of an unsexed Virgin Mary) reinforces sexual hierarchy. She goes on to say how the entire conceptual system of patriarchy has been the product of males and serves the interests of a sexist society. As a consequence, the perception of social roles becomes fetishised; husbands, sons,

fathers become larger than life Godlike incarnations prompting Mary Daly to the well-known feminist maxim: "If God is male, then the male is God". This belief system becomes hardened and objectified, seeming to have an unchangeable independent validity of its own.

When Miller's son dies she feels as if God has rejected her (forcing 'Cycle's' distraught question: "What God has thus forsaken me?") and denied her a meaningful existence. Perhaps she feels similarly rejected in childhood by her father and in marriage by her husband. Ultimately, meaning is located in the male; be it father, husband, son or God. When Miller perceives herself to be rejected by God, life becomes meaningless. (Here Miller has affinities with both Jonker and Plath whose poetic is moulded and given shape around the rejection of fathers and lovers. A comparative analysis and correlation of Ruth Miller to these poets will be explored in Chapter 3 of this dissertation.) The divine can only be properly spoken of with the use of the spiritually masculine to the exclusion of the passive, material feminine. What right does 'she' have to exist when meaning is fostered in the male - the very source of 'her' rejection? What hope is there if 'her' only access to meaning is a male God; a 'his', a 'him' and a 'he' - a God whose meaning remains, through definitive naming, masculinised and inaccessible? As Victor White, cited in *The Feminine Dimension of the Divine* (1994), observes:

Where the god is male and father only, and... is associated with law, order, civilization, *logos* and super-ego, religion - and the pattern of life which it encourages - tends to become a matter of these only, to the neglect of nature, instinct,... feeling, *eros*, and what Freud called the 'id'. Such a religion, so far from 'binding together' and integrating, may all too easily become an instrument of repression, and so of individual and social disintegration.

(1994: 40)

Patriarchy constructs the world in language and in imagery in such a way as to marginalize women. This bias against the humanity of women is intrinsic to inherited religious structures and paradigms of thought that are deeply entrenched. "Women", says Joan Chamberlain Emerson extrapolating on a definition of feminist theology in her book *The Feminine Dimension of the Divine* (1994), "have been robbed of the power of naming, of naming themselves, the world, and ultimate holy mystery, having instead to receive the names given by those who rule over them" (1994: pp. 26 & 27). Emerson picks up on this idea first introduced by Daly (1986). To exist humanly, says Daly, is to name the self, the world and God. Patriarchal discourse reduces divine mystery to such an extent that "the single, reified metaphor of the ruling man...loses its religious signification and ability to point to the ultimate truth" (1986: 36). Any hope for transcendence is choked off in the polluting atmosphere of the images, ideas, values and structures of patriarchy. Women's experience of being becomes an experience of otherness and alienation. Daly (1986) cites an example taken from the writings of George Baum to illustrate this claustrophobic and marginalizing patriarchal system of naming at work:

To believe that God is father is to become aware of oneself not as a stranger, not as an outsider or an alienated person, but as a son who belongs or a person appointed to a marvellous destiny, which he shares with the whole community. To believe that God is Father means to be able to say "we" in regard to all men. (1986: 20)

Such language (the one-sex symbolism for God and for the human relationship to God) says Daly, makes women aware of themselves as alienated strangers or outsiders. By implication, meta-meanings remain inaccessible. This remoteness manifests in a heightened sense of exclusion, alienation and as a consequence, existential crisis.

The expression of loss and existential angst which manifests in Miller's poetry is not only the expression of a modernist poet as many readings of Miller's poetry would suggest, those in particular undertaken by Chapman in his early criticism, but that of a woman writing in a specific historical space and time. Chapman, in a chapter on Ruth Miller in *South African English Poetry: A Modern Perspective* (1984) says of her poetic: "The transient, the fragmentary, the incomplete, the indeterminate – all these were part of the condition of Ruth Miller's own life. The manner of the modern was at once the matter of her day-to-day existence" (1984: 140). In the same chapter he also says "In her later poetry she becomes even more self-assertively modernist" (1984: 131). Although Chapman identifies the modern with "her day-to-day existence", he fails to make the connection between the modern and the day-to-day existence of a 'her'. Chapman has since revised his earlier writings and come to acknowledge that reading Miller's poetry purely as modernist expression does not provide an adequate interpretation of her artifice. However, a feminist reading focussing exclusively on Miller's position as a woman living within a specific historical context, can be accused of "throwing the baby out with the bath water". Miller affiliates herself with modernism and it is not a misreading to suggest that her poetry, like the modernist project, desires to replace God with art. Miller's existential angst is generated from the conviction that without God the world is meaningless. But what propels Miller to adopt this pessimistic outlook? What explains Miller's desire to dethrone God and put Him in his place? On his latest reading on Miller in 'Ruth Miller: Breaking Silences?' (1990) Chapman says: "I now feel dissatisfied with several aspects of my earlier response, and find it increasingly difficult to separate Miller's poems from biographical, social and literary contexts" (1990: 13). Miller's modernist style is but a symptom of an underlying dis-ease, a conflict in

being. I would like to suggest that it is primarily Miller's experience as a woman on which her psychic alienation and angst feed: a woman who is bound to a system where all meaning is located in patriarchal narratives (of which the Judeo-Christian bible features as ultimate expression). Miller fails to find meaning in this system, resisting yet appropriating it at the same time so that her poetry becomes a complex and conflicting, ambiguous expression of both.

Miller is enmeshed in the myth of separation and return, birth and death. Christianity envisions human life, says Daly (1986), in these terms, looking forward to a return to the father in heaven. The eternal circle of separation from and return to infantile dependence has been the story of the feminine mode of existence. Susan Sellers (1994), in her introduction to the *Hélène Cixous Reader*, mentions Cixous' suggestion that the very act of writing becomes reparation of the separation between the self and "m/other" (1994: xxix). Poetics, if you like, becomes a form of atonement for the loss of the m/other.

In her poems where the expression of religious motifs is obvious, Miller undertakes the project of iconoclasm. Daly (1986) defines iconoclasm as the breaking of idols and dethronement of what one perceives to be false gods (the god of explanation, otherworldliness and judgement) and the ideas and symbols of God that religion has foisted on the human spirit. Though Miller attempts to separate from and voices her rejection of the false god, she returns again and again to the security of being rather than not being, of having a god rather than having no God. She is unable to escape the meaning-making system of the Judeo-Christian biblical narratives. The question whether to be or not to be in the world of a false God becomes Miller's predicament. Perhaps the tragedy engendered in Ruth Miller's poetic is her gender: though she confronts the nothingness of being, she cannot consciously find

transcendence, or negotiate a way out of the maze of masculinised images and metaphors that structure her reality (though she hints at alternate meanings in some of her later poetry). As Hélène Cixous in 'The Art of Innocence' (collected in *The Hélène Cixous Reader*) writes: "One can say nothing about God. And another way of speaking about God is to say God of him" (1994: 99).

Ruth Miller's poetic is fragmented into a conflicting cacophony of voices seeking both separation and reconciliation, trapped within a crisis of meaning. Laurie Finke in *Feminist Theory, Women's Writing* (1992) extrapolates on the conflict manifest in women's writing in her discussion of "Dialogic Feminism". Finke, in an appropriation of Bakhtinian theorising, says: "Bakhtin argues that all discourse is inherently dialogic and double-voiced, that it involves 'intense interaction and struggle between one's own and another's word,...in which [these words] oppose or...interanimate one another'" (1992: 12). Every utterance, Finke says, is always inhabited by the voice of the "other", or many others, because the interests of race, class, gender, ethnicity, age, and any number of other related "accents" intersect in any utterance (1992: 13). Feminist discourse, Finke continues, "is by its very nature the model of a complex heteroglossia; a refraction of the speaker's intention, another's speech in another's language because it always contains and struggles against another's (in this instance masculinist) speech" (1992: 15).

Metelerkamp's dichotomous reading (1992) of Miller's poetry: the conflict between received and engendered ideas, the law of the father and lore of the mother reveals this distinctly dialogic quality. Miller's words and the Word play against each other in what becomes ultimately a complex and paradoxically unified expression of self.

Reading Miller, or any writer for that matter, should not become a project sidetracked into following singular, linear meanings. Instead, I would like to suggest, one should open the text and consequently oneself up to a multiplicity of meanings. Conflict and ambiguities should be embraced and the seemingly singular shattered into the myriad of mosaics that create the whole. Hélène Cixous in 'The Newly Born Woman' (collected in the *Hélène Cixous Reader*) writes that what makes women's writing course with a collective of meanings is its "peopling". (1994: 42). That is to say, the distinctly dialogic quality of women's writing containing multiple voices within a singular expression; the interplay between the self and the other, the masculine and the feminine. This "peopling", expands Cixous, gives neither rest nor security, always disturbs the relationship to reality and produces uncertainty.

It is not enough says Adrienne Rich, cited in Chapman (1990), to read the words on the page. We also need "to read the contradictions, the suppressions, the silent words in the spaces between the poems" (1990: 17). Ultimately, we need to reconstruct text as manifestations of subjectivity, however conflicting that subjectivity may be. Writing brings the reader to question the between in between self and other. It is the space between that is most telling, the space between that shapes the whole, the space between which continuously threatens to implode into nothingness, the space between that is the very stuff of existence and it is the space between that Miller speaks into being.

What is to follow is an extensive analysis of a selection of Ruth Miller's poetry taken from her collections *Floating Island* (FI) and *Selected Poems* (SP) as well as some of her uncollected poems edited by Lionel Abrahams in *Ruth Miller: Poems, Prose, Plays* (PPP) published in 1965, 1968 and 1990 respectively. These poems were chosen to demonstrate and reveal the nature of Miller's conflicted vision. In

Chapter 2, acute attention will be given in particular to her use of overt religious motifs as it is within these figurations that Miller's perception of God the Father unfolds and her crisis in faith is revealed. In Chapter 3, I will discuss the relation between the loss (or the fear of loss) in personal relationship (be it husband/wife or mother/son) and the loss of faith in divinity for these two ideals (religion and love) are inextricably linked. Finally, in Chapter 4, the progression in Miller's poetic trajectory, the active appropriation of religious iconoclasm and development of a more confessional tone will receive in-depth comment and analysis.

CHAPTER 2

Much of Ruth Miller's poetic vision addresses the potential of the Word to generate a meta-meaning that corresponds to her belief system. The failure of the Word to live up to her expectations is a thematic element binding the poems examined in this chapter. 'There are Wounds', the opening poem of *Floating Island* (1965: 1) sets the tone for the examination of the poems that are to follow:

Written on wind or water
Word is flesh. Soon or later
Flesh must speak in tones
So dark they pierce the skin.

Stigmata are not revealed
At such times: There are wounds
A Thomas would not dare
To plunge his hand within.

'There are Wounds', a short poem of only two four-lined stanzas, is dense with elusive biblical allusions. The speaker articulates what is at once a complex and contradictory resolution: a suffering that negates yet locates consolation in the word of God as Miller appropriates biblical diction in her derisive treatment of biblical narrative.

"Word is flesh" is a modified re-iteration of the biblical "And the Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us" (John 1:14, The Holy Bible). This biblical reference alludes to the manifestation of the totality of God in Christ. The subtle yet telling modification from "was made" to "is" is indicative of how strongly the speaker associates the Word with Christ, locating divinity firmly within man; the figure of

Christ that is the very incarnation of deity. Accordingly, divinity should “speak in tones / So dark they pierce the skin.” and be revealed through suffering. However in comparison to the biblical doctrine, Miller’s wounds, unlike the revelation of stigmata, are bereft of any form of divine favour (“Stigmata are not revealed / At such times”) or benevolence. The poet is unable to transcend her suffering through seeking consolation in the Word of God or more specifically, Jesus Christ. Though it appears that the speaker fails to find meaning in pain through the appropriation of biblical metaphor, she ends the poem saying that even “A [doubting] Thomas would not dare / To plunge his hand within”. This suggests that the meaning of her suffering is so painfully obvious to her that it cannot be doubted. The manifestation of God is ultimately painful, rather than revelatory and the Word of God fails to provide her with a meaningful narrative for the solace she desires.

In ‘Penguin on the Beach’ (FI: 2) as in ‘There are Wounds’, Miller mourns her inability to be sustained by the comfort offered in biblical meta-narratives. In this poem the speaker does not make a general observation but rather subjective projection reflecting her spiritual state of being. The poet invests her descriptions of the penguin, suffering in the aftermath of an oil spill, with human qualities. The penguin, alienated from its salvation, is a “Stranger in his own element” and is figured in sadness, despondency and apathy. Miller articulates an inner, subjective and personal vision by using the external, natural world as a screen onto which her consciousness is projected. External imagery is thus appropriated to express an inner reality.

The way in which the speaker personifies the image of the penguin is telling. The penguin is figured as a male and its subjectivity is captured in male personal and possessive pronouns; the penguin is referred to as a “he”, “his” penguin suit and gait are also distinctly masculine as he “Waddles in his tailored coat-tails”. There are

numerous instances in Miller's poetry where she articulates her personal reality via the masculine natural world; 'Mantis' (FI: 23) and 'Spider' (FI: 37) being further examples. Miller finds correspondence in and relies on a masculine protagonist to express her reality. Ironically, Miller figures her alienation in an alienating, masculinised voice as masculine authority is internalised and unconsciously appropriated.

In 'Penguin on the Beach', Miller does not find a pristine, natural correspondence in the projection of her consciousness. Instead the natural world and penguin she chooses to personify are desecrated by the oil spill that "Has spread a deep commercial stain / Over his downy shirt front. Sleazy, grey, / It clogs the sleekness". The natural realm of the penguin, the sea, is polluted and he is forced to escape to land: "He shudders now from the clean flinching wave, / Turns and plods back up the yellow sand, / Ineffably weary, triumphantly sad". Rather than catching fish himself, "He eats / Fish from his Saviour's hands, and it tastes black". The sustenance the penguin receives from his Saviour is both sustaining and a confirmation of his lost natural world. Though he needs to eat it, it reminds him only of what he has lost. The Saviour does not alleviate the penguin's angst, ironically He figures as a catalyst to the expression of even more despair. Again, as in 'There Are Wounds', the Saviour Christ figure, the incarnate deity, cannot provide the speaker with the emotional sustenance and comfort she desperately seeks, though she finds no alternative but to seek this sustenance in Him.

Miller insists on locating meaning within a masculine, biblical narrative, yet fails to be sustained by it. Perhaps the tragedy of Miller's early poetic is that she fails to recognise her compliance with this exiling meta-meaning authority and thus has no

way to negotiate a route out of the very voicing of authority (even if in the same breath, she derides this authority).

'Mantis' (FI: 23), as already noted, is another poetic example of the personified expression of the poet's reality and again, as in 'Penguin on the Beach', Miller's choice of animal is telling:

Responding to his hands, I touched him once.
His minute mouth roared
In such a horror of silence that I saw;
I saw his face grow large as mine
The tender spring green blades of him
Thrust like vengeance. His vicious eyes
Glared. His mouth was red
As hell, the pointed face
Filling with knowledgeable malice.
His hands – O God, his hands
Came for me, crept for me, felt for me through the space
Of cosmic distances that make an inch. (stanza 2)

Death becomes the ultimate nightmare and the promise of heaven is transfigured into a hellish realisation. Death, says Chapman (1984) in his primary reading of this poem, is figured as an alien, primitive creature; a projection of the poet's own nightmares. However upon a later re-reading of 'Mantis', Chapman (1990) says, "Whatever the gains of interpreting these images in terms of generalized modern angst, I was palpably blind to the poet's own insistence on male-female designations" (1990: 19). Miller's nightmare, the figure of the mantis, is distinctly personified as male. Miller's appropriation of a male mantis to figure her angst could be indicative (as in 'Penguin on the Beach') of her internalisation of a masculinised voice, or she could be voicing her fear of male domination, specifically male religious domination.

The poet (as in 'There are Wounds') attempts to negate religious narrative, but is unable to free herself from her reliance on religious figuration and the internalisation

of the Word. She says of the mantis in the opening line, "He lifts his small hands / To the god of nothingness". This suggests the meaningless effacement of God when one is confronted by death. The proper noun "God" with a capital "G" becomes a common, lower case "god". However, the speaker goes on to use religious motifs and affirm the existence of God. She shapes the mantis as a hellish embodiment, "His mouth was red / As hell" and when she is confronted by this image, she goes as far as to make a desperate plea to God, "O God, his hands / Came for me, crept for me". The speaker's poetics balance on an ambivalent dichotomy: God is at one and the same time both desired and rejected. She fails to free herself from a biblical narrative or find an alternative to this narrative.

Interestingly it would appear that Miller, after publishing the poem in *Floating Island*, becomes conscious of this dichotomy and is clearly made uneasy by it. In *Selected Poems*, she includes a subtly revised version of 'Mantis' with a telling omission: "- O God, his hands" is conspicuously absent. Miller's revision is suggestive of a poetic voice that has undergone development. The nature of this development will receive further elaboration in Chapter 4.

In 'Feeding the Pigeons' (FI: 16), the speaker removes herself from the realm of immediate identification to that of ironic observer. This poem describes how feeding the pigeons allows the pigeon feeder to identify with God ("Feeding the pigeons makes him feel like God"). The god the feeder identifies with is all-powerful and he, alone, controls the pigeons' means of sustenance. "The crumbs bounce silently as snow" is an image that recalls the Old Testament account (in the book of Exodus) of the manna that dropped from heaven to feed the Israelites on their exodus from Egypt during their journey into the desert wilderness. It is because of God's mercy that the Israelites were saved from death by starvation.

The pigeons grow frantic in their singular quest for bread. Like God's sheep, they "flock" to their Shepherd, the pigeon feeder:

With avid thrusts, and sideways beat their beaks
In frantic morse of hunger, signalling
In scuff of salmon claws
And throaty murmuring,
Until the flock comes swerving in a roar
Of muscled beating, a percussive streak. (stanza 3)

Consumed by the desire to feed, they are "Engrossed with dreams of nothing else but bread" and the pigeon feeder has "Grown wide with love"; his love and pleasure in feeding the pigeons is correlated to the pigeons' acute desire to feed. In the speaker's reference to Olympus in the first line of the last stanza, "Olympus bends his head", the mythical Mount Olympus, abode of the Greek Gods is personified. The pigeon feeder, presumably feeding the pigeons from the comparatively lofty heights of a bench, becomes the pinnacle of godliness from whom issue forth benefits to the pigeons (and by extension humankind).

Both the pigeon feeder and the pigeons are dependent on one another. The poet, indignant at this relationship, celebrates the desecration of this image in her comparison of droppings with Communion bread: "One cock in prancepose stands / To pearl round droppings at his feet-resplendent / With gift of faith, white as Communion bread". By using this suggestive comparison, the poet is critical of the idea that partaking of the bread of Communion is a means of communing with Christ and that to have eternal life one must commit oneself to Jesus as the revealer of Logos sent from God. The pigeons have complete faith in their feeder/god and their droppings (as with partaking in communion) become signifiers of this unthinking

belief in a higher power. The poet suggests the relationship between God and “man” is conditional, bound by control and mindless dependency.

Miller critiques the biblical morality of the belief that the wicked are punished by God in her poem ‘Credo’ (FI: 33). The speaker begins the poem with an epigraph, “*He must be wicked to deserve such pain*”, a line taken from Robert Browning’s ‘Childe Roland to the Dark Tower Came’ (*The Norton Anthology of Poetry*, 1996, p. 928), a dramatic narrative poem following a heroic quest into a landscape of horror. The speaker maps the nightmare of her inner landscape alluding to and making use of Browning’s hellish figurations. Browning’s imagination, the dreamlike expression of the innermost pattern of his mind, evokes a sense of fear and fright that the speaker adapts and appropriates to figure her very own inner turmoil. Simple moral or even religious terms are inadequate descriptors of the suffering she experiences along her introspective quest.

Browning’s poem, writes Mackie in his study *Thirty Poems by Robert Frost* (1949), is an overt allusion to Shakespeare’s *King Lear*. The title, ‘Childe Roland to the Dark Tower Came’ is the first line of a snatch of a ballad spoken by Edgar, while pretending to be mad, at the end of Act 3, Scene 4 of *King Lear*. In this tragedy, mental anguish is closely intertwined with physical anguish. Lear’s innermost turmoil is expressed in the storm that rages on the heath. The betrayal by Gloucester’s bastard son Edmund to Reagan and Cornwall results in Gloucester being brutally blinded.

Miller’s ‘Credo’, rich in inter-textual allusion, makes a similar connection between mental and physical anguish. The opening couple of stanzas of ‘Credo’ draw, in graphic detail, the image of a person being blinded: “Open the skull, pry loose the aching nerve / Which jangles through the vast holes of the eyes”. Pain,

physical, mental or both appears meaningless, void of any moral explanation, just as in *King Lear* Gloucester suffers meaninglessly by having his eyes gouged out.

Browning's "He must be wicked to deserve such pain", repeated with variation on the pronoun "he" to include "it", "she" and in the first and final repetition of this line, "we" is transformed into an ironic, universal statement of the meaninglessness implicit in any attempt to moralise or explain away pain. By contrast to 'Penguin on the Beach', Miller attempts to transcend the boundaries imposed by referring only to a single sexed pronoun.

In stanza 3, the speaker, suggests Metelkamp (1991), gives a critique of the male moral rationale, or the "Pure mathematics" of the "all-wise" surgeon. That is to say the way in which persecutors explain their persecutions using a logic which the speaker exposes as ironically perverse: "To burn the witch first volley her with stones / Such pain she must be wicked to deserve".

The meaninglessness of 'Credo's' "dark tower of grief", another direct allusion to Browning's 'Childe Roland to the Dark Tower Came', becomes "that hell where nothing is made plain", a place where no sense can be made of the human condition. Hell is no longer the abode of the wicked, but the state of mind of one who cannot find meaning in existence.

The speaker, in the final stanza says, "Who lives in wilderness must expect no rain". The biblical image of "wilderness" denotes a desert landscape characterised by danger, death and punishment. Again, although Miller continually strives to encapsulate her emotional experience against the narrative of biblical morality, she falls time and time again into using biblical figurations to shape her poetic.

In 'Remember Remember' (FI: 17), Miller represents her iconoclastic project (in action in the poems above) as her own alternative to the children's rhyme

("Remember remember the fifth of November...") in 'celebration' of Guy Fawkes Day. The traditional burning of effigies and setting off of fireworks is appropriated to figure the desired destruction of religious beliefs though, after the spectacular fireworks display, the absence of these beliefs leave a heightened sense of insecurity in being.

In the first stanza, the poet says, "The saints are straw", once a fire is sparked there is little doubt that they will be easy to burn. The poet suggests that the saints are constructed from material that burns easily. The opening line of the second stanza, "The grass is littered with fallen stars" recalls a line, "The stars are dead", from the final stanza of W.H. Auden's poem, 'Spain 1937' (*The Norton Anthology of Poetry*, 1996, p. 1365). In both instances these lines are suggestive of religious beliefs losing their place of transcendental meta-meaning and tumbling from the heavens down to the earth.

In stanza 2, "the last / Dogma rockets to find its god", but there is no doubt that there is nothing to be found. Finally, the lights of the fireworks display fade into the darkness of the night:

Each year the flying gold-blurred lights
Fade in a sky as blank as sin.
The spinning night,
Darker than ever, closes in.

After the annual fireworks display, the night is "Darker than ever". The fiery destruction of belief systems is wrought with light creating energy. But after this consumption only a meaningless darkness is left.

Miller's poem 'Cycle' (FI: 44) is written in the aftermath of her son David's death after being electrocuted at the age of fourteen. It is clear that his death propelled her

deeper into a crisis of faith and this poem, intricately crafted and densely allusive, becomes her attempt at restoring poetic order to a world of chaos and disharmony; a world where Miller asserts her own meaningful creativity in the face of the perceived meaninglessness of biblical meaning-making system. Her writing becomes, as Cixous suggests, reparation of the loss between self and other or more specifically her self and her s/Son.

In the cycle of grief, to be experienced over and over again, Miller's poetic creation spans seven parts instead of days. But Miller's creativity is cyclical rather than cumulative. It does not celebrate the incarnation of God's light into the world, the positivistic progression of humankind's creation, but is rather a dark incantation or testament to a cruel, perverse and unmerciful God.

Miller questions God in a cathartic outpouring of grief and sorrow. It is important to make clear the distinction that she questions God and not the very existence of a God. God remains throughout the poem hated yet not negated. It is perhaps within this space that Miller is entrapped; she repudiates her Judeo-Christian meaning-making system yet fails to find an alternative way to make meaning (except in the very expression of life's perceived meaninglessness which is in itself a meta-meaning of sorts.) Indeed as previously explored, the unresolved crisis in faith heightened in 'Cycle' is Miller's theme of choice, weaving its way throughout much of her poetry.

In 'Cycle', more questions, often rhetorical, are posed (twelve to be exact) than answers given. This line of questioning, cumulatively builds on the speaker's distress. The first part begins this interrogation with, "Does God exact lifepayment?" This is a reference to a line, "Doth God exact day-labour, light denied?" from John Milton's sonnet, 'On his Blindness' (*The Poetical Works of John Milton*, 1903, p. 84). Both Miller and Milton question the vengeful power of God as a taker of life and light

respectively. In 'Cycle', Miller's question receives only another question in response (the remainder of the first stanza).

Milton's play, 'Samson Agonistes' is also directly alluded to in the lines, "He should remember at this midnight hour- / Eyeless in Gaza, who would not tread the mill". These lines recall lines 40 and 41 from Samson's opening soliloquy, "Ask for this great Deliverer now, and find him / Eyeless in Gaza at the Mill with slaves..." (*The Poetical Works of John Milton*, 1903, p. 84). Here the protagonist Samson is fallen from favour and close to despair. Anthony Louw (cited in John Spencer Hill's study *John Milton: Poet, Priest and Prophet*, 1979) says Samson is in a state of spiritual death, into which he has fallen as a result of a betrayal of God's trust. In Milton's view, regeneration is impossible without the assistance of God's grace, but at the same time the individual must co-operate with grace and the opportunity for spiritual renovation. Milton's 'Samson Agonistes', suggests Spencer Hill (1979), is a spiritual journey from darkness to light and from loss to restoration. In the wilderness of her grief, Miller appropriates these Miltonic ideas to question the possibility of embarking on such a redeeming journey. She wonders at the possibility of God's grace and answers her own line of questioning with, "But God, not listening can hear no tears". Not even the hope for the possibility of God's grace exists for the bereaved speaker.

Metelerkamp (1991) says that one of the central thematic concerns of this poem is the conflagration of the mother's and the son's identities and the enforced separation that results in death. Within this first part, the poet introduces the image of herself as a tree, a tree of life, an extended metaphor that sinks its roots, sheds its leaves and has its limbs lopped throughout 'Cycle'. In stanza 1, the death of her son is a limb "wrack-wrenched from the tree". As a consequence, it is as if part of the speaker has

died with the boy's death. The limb is forcibly wrenched from the tree in an unnatural separation. God wrenches her son away from her, in an action that suggests forceful violence and complete disregard for the poet's own needs for self-completeness. The speaker's emotions heighten throughout the course of this stanza. Her tears, like the sap of a lopped tree, bear no loving witness, instead they "Bellow" with outrage: "What God has thus forsaken me?" A chilling question which echoes throughout this poem and reverberates time and time again in others.

The second and third parts of 'Cycle' extend the image initiated in the first, "My roots put on your leaf". And after the leaf has been shed all meaningful enlightenment is "Quenched" leaving only darkness that is the rule, not the exception of life. Miller captures (what she feels to be) the unnatural perversity of her son's untimely death in her metaphoric configuration of their relationship. The mother outlives her child; she is the tree with developed roots, sprouting limbs and leaves which have less rather than more power of regeneration and reproduction. Her son, rather than figured as the seed infused fruit of her limbs, becomes an expendable appendage, a projection that is easily lost.

Part 4 opens with an image evoking Miller's all consuming grief that is sparked by her son's death and further re-iterates the difficulty (perceived as a perversity) of outliving one's child:

Will the matchstick set the fire alight,
The centre of the matchstick and the flame?

Her son's life becomes a flame, an image of destruction, and her self a matchstick. She doesn't bring life or everlasting light into the world, but rather an ephemeral light

that is short-lived leaving only darkness, devastation and self-annihilation in its consumptive passing.

Part 4 also alludes to W.B. Yeats's 'The Second Coming' (*The Norton Anthology of Poetry*, 1996, p. 1091) a poem that has become a manifesto for modernist thought; expressing the concern over the fragmentation of centralised meaning-making systems and the fear of chaos that is released by this shattering of meaning. The first stanza reads as follows:

Turning and turning in the widening gyre
The falcon cannot hear the falconer;
Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,
The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere
The ceremony of innocence is drowned;
The best lack all conviction, while the worst
Are full of passionate intensity.

The speaker in 'Cycle', drawing influence from Yeats, ponders the disintegration of order into chaos. She wonders at the possibility of order remaining intact in the face of traumatic experience and asks:

Will the centre of the steeple reach the peak
Like a flame in the sky, or will it topple:
I am poor, I am cold, said the old
Mystery man to the beggar of the night.
Will the rings spin forever round old Saturn,
The centre come apart, or float like silk? (part 4, stanza 3)

In the first couple of lines, the poet poses the question if it is possible for faith (as suggested in 'The Second Coming') to be heightened through devastation. She uses the image of a steeple (atop a church, a place of worship and meaning praising) reaching into the heights of the heavens like a flame to suggest the possibility of achieving a closer connection to God. The poet modifies Yeats's image of falcon and

falconer into rings that “spin forever round old Saturn” to extend the metaphor of the relationship between people and their Judeo-Christian meaning-making system. The astronomical feature of the rings around Saturn is of symbolic import suggesting the binding relationship between humanity and God. But what, suggests the speaker, is the nature of this God? In Roman mythology, Saturn (known as Chronos in Greek mythology) was the god of fertility, agriculture and time. Saturn also represents the imposition of law and order on the land. But more disturbingly Saturn, father of the Gods and a generation removed from Chaos, precedes his offspring’s meaningful ordering of the world. Furthermore, he is also conceptualised as the God of vengeance. This representation of Saturn has become entrenched in Western classical mythology. Chaucer gives us a view of the vengeful Saturn in lines 2453-2470 of the ‘Knight’s Tale’ (*The Riverside Chaucer*, 1987, p. 58):

“My deere doghter Venus,” quod Saturne,
“My cours, that hath so wyde for to turne,
Hath moore power than woot any man.
Myn is the drenching in the see so wan;
Myn is the prison in the derke cote;
Myn is the strangling and hanging by the
 throte,
The murmure and the cherles rebelling,
The groynynge, and the pryvee empoysonyng;
I do vengeance and pleyn correccioun,
Whil I dweddele in the signes of the leoun.
Myn is the ruyne of the hye halles,
The fallynge of the toures and of the walles
Upon the mynour or the carpenter.
I slow Sampson, shakynge the piler;
And myne be the maladyes colde,
The dark treasons, and the castes olde;
My looking is the fader of pestilence.
Now weep namoore; I shall doon diligence.

Miller’s appropriation of the image of a ringed Saturn is suggestive of the relationship between people and a God who exerts not only law and order, but also his chaotic

wrath. Human catastrophe, as figured in the above extract from Chaucer's 'Knight's Tale', becomes a manifestation of Saturn's powerful fury. Thus by extension, one may deduce that the speaker's invocation of mythical Saturn suggests the nature of God is vengeful; God is blamed and deemed responsible for the death of her son. But at the same time as this God is blamed, His meaning is rendered redundant: Saturn is qualified as being "old", suggesting that his meaning-making system or one's belief in this mythological meaning-making system is antiquated. Even mythology, the last bastion of modernist meaning is out-dated. The paradoxical irony of Miller's use of mythological figuration (as with her biblical imagery) is that she uses it advisedly to show a lack of meaning. She reasserts her creativity in breaking down narratives of meta-origin, be they mythical and/or biblical.

"Old Saturn" is recalled in the lines, "Will I hear anything but a whisper of the old / Mystery in the ultimate dark?". Miller interrogates the possibility of laying claim to any form of mystifying meta-meaning. The "Mystery" is not able to speak or correspond loudly with her sensitivities and instead can only offer a whisper in the darkness of non-meaning.

I am poor, I am cold, said the old
Mystery man to the upwrenched wide-wracked beggar without
arms. (part 4, stanza 6)

The mystery man is unable to provide the beggar with support as he is himself poor, cold and old. The beggar is also unable to receive any kind of comfort the mystery man might offer as he is armless and cannot partake reciprocally in any form of comforting action by throwing his arms around the mystery man in an embrace. The image of the "upwrenched wide-wracked beggar without arms" is a further re-iteration of the figuration of the limbs that have been "wrack-wrenched" from the tree

in part 1. The tree is figuratively limbless while the beggar is literally limbless. These repeated images of lopping and amputation suggest radical incompleteness, an incompleteness that can never receive any form of consolation in meaning-making systems, be they religious, philosophical or mythological.

Light and dark are elements that play against each other and recur throughout 'Cycle', suggestive as Chapman (1984) says of a conflict between the poet's scepticism and her impulse to religion. Yet, ultimately, there is no comfort derived from revealed faith. In part 5, Miller expresses the desire for a reprieve from her grief saying in the second person to her son, "Cover my eyes with your palm / Your darkness is too bright". The memory of her son (and possibly his death by intense electrocuting light energy) is too much for her to bear. But at the same time it is impossible for her to extinguish his memory, since encapsulated within her memory of his death is the joy of his life ("Bright in your valiant dream").

The image of her son, initiated in parts 1, 2 and 3 is returned to and extended in part 6. Her son becomes an autumnal leaf, shaken loose from the tree, "The dropped leaf / Held the colour of flame / When the trees stirred." Again, as in part 1's image of a limb "wreck-wrenched from the tree", outside forces (in this case the wind and change of season) are responsible for the separation. Although in the case of part 6, autumn is a natural, seasonal occurrence. From the first stanza to the second, autumn develops into winter, the season of death and full-blown mourning. Stanza 3 describes an emotional desert wilderness, "unblessed by rain"; a suffering bereft of any form of godly salvation. The final stanza concludes with the movingly poignant lines, "And poverty of my mouth / Struggles to form the vast / Two syllables of your name." The poet struggles to say the "The encompassing word", the name of her son (the two syllabled "David") just as she struggles to name and have faith in the Word

of God and physical manifestation of this word in Christ (the incarnate deity or “the Word became flesh”). The death of the mother’s son, unlike the death of Christ, is not accompanied by the promise of resurrection and redemption, but rather exists as a treatise to the meaninglessness of such a narrative. The conceptualisation of the poet’s son is conflated to Christ-like proportions and as a consequence, the son’s meaningful presence in the mother’s life is correlated with biblical meaning. The loss of her son becomes by extension to be the loss of logos.

In part 7, pain becomes a “condition” of daily existence. It is an integral “part of living” and, as in ‘Blue-mantled Mary’ and ‘Voicebox’ (both will be explored in Chapter 4), living, too, is but a “condition of dying”. Miller again uses an image from the plant world, “The delicate tissue / Fails where it is fronded” as a metaphorical repetition of the failure of propagation. Fronds are the leaf-like structures of ferns and facilitate reproduction. However, in this scenario (the untimely and tragic death of Miller’s son) a frond has failed.

Who is the “you” the speaker addresses in this part of the poem? Is he her son or her Saviour? Another “mystery man” of sorts makes his appearance. This “you” supersedes contradiction; he is “Listening with passion to the murmur / That leapt from the secrets of the great man, deaf”; he “Parted and met, in aloneness, no ears hearing together, / no eyes seeing the same”. It appears the addressee is both an idealised construct, existing beyond the constraints of his physical humanity (“no ears hearing together, / No eyes seeing the same”) and beyond time and space (“In the centuries back of the questioning, you met, / Parted and met, in aloneness”). But, at the same time “you” is a tangible presence whose “laughter” is “ringing the bells in my breast”. The speaker’s addressee “you” transcends the memory of her son becoming a hyper-real address to The Son.

You were not good to the poor: You enriched them
With eyes and hands that knew to speak and be silent.
You were not kind to the maimed: You un-maimed them. (part 7, stanza 8)

“You” or “mystery man” is not an empathizer offering comfort to those suffering from human tragedy, but a miracle worker, reversing the existential condition of the poor and the maimed. He is Christ. The images of the above lines are a re-echoing of part 4’s “upwrenched wide-wracked beggar without arms”. Both images gain force through repetition, expressing the desire for a meta-comfort; an otherworldly saviour that can reverse the course of time.

The final stanza of part 7 repeats the opening sentiments namely: the only certainty in life is pain.

To eat pain like bread is a condition
Of living, which is endless dying.
You will not allow me to refuse
My daily bread.

The final words, “My daily bread”, refer ironically to ‘The Lord’s Prayer’ or ‘Our Father’, taught by Jesus to his disciples:

Our father which art in heaven, Hallowed be thy name, Thy Kingdom come.
Thy will be done in earth, *as it is* in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread.
And forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors. And lead us not into
temptation, but deliver us from evil: For thine is the Kingdom, and the power,
and the glory, for ever. Amen. (Matthew 6: 9-13, *The Holy Bible*)

Cross and Livingston (1997) write that ‘The Lord’s Prayer’ has always been regarded by Christians as sacred as it is a prayer given to the church by Jesus himself. It is a cornerstone of religious practice and most Christians are able to recite the prayer by heart. It is usually divided into seven petitions, the first three asking for the glorification of God, the latter four being requests for the chief physical and spiritual

needs of “man”. The meaning of “daily” used to describe the bread which is sought, is however, uncertain. Some interpreters consider the bread to describe all the physical and spiritual needs one requires to live. To paraphrase, “Give us this day our daily bread” becomes give us this day what we need. Instead of receiving a daily allowance of emotional and spiritual sustenance, Miller finds herself in the midst of an emotional breakdown and spiritual drought as every day’s awakening brings with it a painful reminder of what she has lost in the death of her son. At the same time as Miller finds the pain of her son’s absence excruciating, his joy filled memory becomes a counterpoint. While Miller movingly conceptualises mourning, she realises that though every day’s morning brings suffering, the morning is in itself a glorious reminder of her son’s life. The image of morning (and mourning) is transfigured, becoming an image of remembrance and praise:

But the morning is you, and the bread
Warm from the oven; the stars
Crammed in your pocket; the singing
Hallelujahs of dreams. (part 7, stanza 11)

“But” introduces the change in conception of the image of morning from a disheartening to an enlightening image. This is not the first instance in ‘Cycle’ where Miller has juxtaposed the memory of her son’s death with the memory of his life. Miller also introduces the third last stanza with the word “But” (“But to eat pain like bread...”). In this instance, her line of thought changes from the celebration of memory to the daily experiencing of the pain generated by the memory of death. Throughout ‘Cycle’, Miller’s emotions are undergoing their own cyclical course, alternating between the pain and the joy of remembrance. Chapman (1984) elaborates on this dichotomous discourse, saying the cumulative effect of ‘Cycle’s’ imagery

engages a tension between a restless consciousness and a dreamscape. But, to what extent does the poet find consolation and have faith in the vision of her son's memory?

The stanza quoted above lists a series of joyful images: "...bread / Warm from the oven; the stars / Crammed in your pocket; the singing Hallelujahs of dreams". "Bread / warm from the oven" operates antithetically to eating "bread like pain" mentioned in the previous stanza. This image also corresponds at one level to the pleasurable, need fulfilling associations of the image of "daily bread" in 'The Lord's Prayer'. "Singing Hallelujahs" also extends the idea that the blessing that was Miller's son is worthy of giving praise to and exalting God, although the praise giving is "the singing Hallelujahs *of dreams*" [italics mine]. Singing God's praises becomes but a transient and unreal dream, suggesting that hymns and prayers of praise have no place in daily reality. (Miller's concern with the irrelevance of singing God's praises is a corresponding theme in 'Silent the Singer' and 'Voice.Silence.Echo' which will receive further extrapolation in Chapter 4.)

Although the speaker creates a space for the joyful remembrance of her son's life, the agony involved in coming to terms with his death is the overruling emotion and final pronouncement of 'Cycle'. The Judeo-Christian conceptualisation of faith fails her. She is alienated from any form of sustaining comfort and belief that such a meaning-making system might yield. Her son is dead, but unlike Christ's crucifixion, his death brings no promise of resurrection, redemption and ultimate salvation. Miller's son's death transfigures into a logos that she cannot even bear to utter; it is the logos of life's ultimate meaninglessness. Not only has Miller lost her son, but she has lost her religion too.

'Therapy', an uncollected poem included in *Ruth Miller: Poems, Prose, Plays* (1990: 122) expresses the idea of one's creative self being consumed by (and pre-occupied with) religion where "Word consumes the word/ and all's laid bare". Similarly in 'Cycle', Miller's all consuming despair is laid bare in the creative act of writing a poem. She is, as Metelerkamp (1991) suggests unable to break free from her despair, and shape her words into a new substitution for the Word. Instead, Miller's words bear tragic, elegiac witness to the loss of the Word.

CHAPTER 3

Beloved, let us love one another: for love is of God; and every one that loveth is born of God, and knoweth God. He that loveth not, knoweth not God; for God is love. In this was manifested the love of God toward us, because that God sent his only begotten Son into the world, that we might live through him. Herein is love, not that we loved God, but that he loved us, and sent his Son *to be* the propitiation for our sins. Beloved, if God loved us, we ought to love one another. No man has seen God at anytime. If we love one another, God dwelleth in us, and his love is perfected in us. (1 John 4: 7-12, *The Holy Bible*)

Equating love with God is an implicit tenet of the scriptures suggests Metelerkamp (1991). Love, and by implication religion, fails to generate the meaning Miller so desperately seeks. Metelerkamp writes, “Even love cannot redress loss since love is itself lost” (1991: 57). Both romantic and religious ideologies are effaced, resulting in the evocation of loss that is acutely voiced in much of Miller’s poetry. Mary Daly’s, “If God is male, than the male is God” reverberates as a thematic motif through much of Miller’s poetry and the loss of relationship to man becomes by implication the loss of relationship to God and ultimate loss of logos.

In ‘Comfort Me’ (FI: 3), Miller voices the desire for a saviour figure. Metelerkamp (1991) says that it is not fortuitous that the title of the poem imperfectly echoes Isaiah 40:1, “Comfort ye, comfort ye, my people” (*The Holy Bible*). Miller seeks salvation through love and by implication wishes to salvage God, an empowered God of strength and nurturing including both male and female characteristics.

The comfort she envisions in this poem does not only originate from a single, male subject. Instead, the comforter is split into two personalities described in tandem with dual characteristics. Firstly, Miller calls for the comfort of a distinctly male subject, "Comfort me. I need strong arms". Then she goes on in the next line to figure her desire for a comforter by using the most telling of female descriptors, breasts, "Cosset me. I need strong breasts". Miller fails however, (yet again) in stanza 2, to find the comfort and solace she so seeks in reality in either of these personalities. The strength and nurturing she desires from both male and female are drained, "Your arms have grown slack, holding on to things / Your breast has grown slack, feeding the world". Reality is juxtaposed with wish fulfilment. No known person is able to provide the salvation she seeks. Only a stranger is able to grant her her wish, "Comfort me, stranger. Your arms are like trees about me. / Comfort me, stranger. Your breast is full, creamy as milk".

In the fourth stanza, Miller voices a change in thought introduced by the phrase "But look:" and she denies the possibility of the existence of even her hope for comfort. She realises that this dream of seeking solace in an unknown saviour is futile and all she has left to hold onto and cling to is the "lean" and "flabby" reality of known disempowerment. "Is there no firmness left, no strength?" Miller questions in stanza 5 only to re-iterate in reply "No. There is nothing we dare recognise". Miller seems to suggest that we dare not hope for salvation, for if we do we run the risk of suffering disenchanting disappointment. There is no possibility for hope and thus there is no possibility of salvation.

Finally, Miller suggests that the reality of the passing of time robs one of the potential to find solace in hope, "The helmet-maker's wife *was once* a beautiful woman. / The helmet-maker *was* a shining man" [italics mine]. The reference to the

helmet-maker and his wife alludes to Hephaestus and Aphrodite, the Greek god/goddess of volcanic fire and love respectively. Hephaestus is the patron of smiths and craftsmen and is often depicted working at his forge. Mythological figurations bring to mind the potency of Aphrodite and the equality in the relationship between Aphrodite and Hephaestus. Although in her figurations Miller suggests both a male and female comfort figure conceptualised in parallel, by the conclusion of this poem a bias in representation becomes apparent; the female figure is subsumed in favour of the male figure. The identity of the female is shaped in terms of the male. The female is the "helmet-maker's wife" while the male is simply the "helmet-maker". The helmet-maker is a craftsman, a creator. He actively has the power to make physically protective helmets. His wife (in contrast to traditional depictions of Aphrodite) is powerless and has no empowering craft; instead she is only able to achieve power through association. Miller denies the parity suggested in mythology. Even when Miller attempts to figure comforting images of parity, internalised ideas about a woman's role manifest themselves. The woman exists only in relation to a man. Miller's very language, striving for equality but at the same time leaning towards gender bias, fails to create comfort. Miller fails to find salvation in the secular world of men and women just as she fails to find salvation in the divine Heavens above this secular world.

The loss of relationship, be it mother/son, husband/wife, person/God, forms the nexus of Miller's poetic. It is out of this acute sense of loss that Miller's angst is generated. Meaning is found in her idealised relation with the significant other and a loss in the relation between her person and others results in her attempts to negate her relation to God and ultimate meaning-making system. Thus the loss of a loved one or

a lover propels Miller into existential crisis where she not only questions her self, but her god.

The loss of relationship is a shared motif in women's poetry in the 1960s. Sylvia Plath and Miller's Afrikaans contemporary, Ingrid Jonker (It is a point of interest to note that Miller's first collection of published poems, *Floating Island*, received the inaugural Ingrid Jonker Memorial prize.), channel their loss in relationship into an acutely attuned poetic. In both Miller and Jonker's poetry, the experience of loss becomes all-important and defining. Perhaps this aspect of their poetic results from similar childhoods characterised by the absence of fathers. Jonker's father was absent most of her formative childhood years, only claiming parental guardianship after the death of Jonker's mother when Jonker was ten years of age. In contrast to Ingrid Jonker's biography, Miller's remains sketchy. Most of what is gleaned about Miller's childhood is taken from her (what Lionel Abrahams – in his introduction to *Ruth Miller: Poems, Prose, Plays* – considers to be autobiographical) short story, 'Perspectives'. The story gives an account of a girl's childhood in the northern Transvaal. We gather she was an only child and that she and her mother had been abandoned by her father. In 'Perspectives' (PPP: 1990) Miller reflects on his absence saying: "How fortunate, in many ways, that fathers didn't really exist. Her own father now – how was he to be explained, distant as he was in another land, separated as he was from her mother. Reasons unknown, undivulged."

As much as Miller strives to deny the existence of her f/Father, he continues to exert a fundamental influence on her aesthetic. Although both Jonker and Miller's relationships to their fathers is defined by absence, it would appear that the presence of the father figure haunts their poetic. Sylvia Plath is also similarly affected by the perceived abandonment of her father who died of diabetes when she was ten years

old. In her poem 'Daddy' (*Norton Anthology of Poetry*, 1996, pp. 1732-1733), Plath extends the image of her father to Godly proportions and describes him as, "Marble-heavy, a bag full of God". The anger at the loss of her father transforms him into an imaginary Nazi figure who transmutes into her lover, both of whom bear the brunt of a hateful outpouring as she identifies herself as a persecuted Jew:

I have always been scared of you,
With your Luftwaffe, your gobbledygook.
And your neat moustache
And your Aryan eye, bright blue.
Panzer-man, panzer man, O you –

Not God but a swastika
So black no sky could squeak through.
Every woman adores a Fascist,
The boot in the face, the brute
Brute heart of a brute like you. (stanzas 9 & 10)

The absence of the father becomes the absence of meaning and because the lover assumes the role of father figure ("I made a model of you, / A man in black with a Meinkampf look"), the loss of the lover is conflated to include the loss of the father and the loss of meaning. The poet's tenuous grip on meaning slips, resulting in Plath's confessional outpouring of anger, reaching its peak in the final stanza:

There's a stake in your fat black heart
And the villagers never liked you.
They are dancing and stamping on you.
They always *knew* it was you.
Daddy, daddy, you bastard, I'm through. (stanza 16)

Although Miller expresses a more restrained introspective angst and does not articulate her emotions in as confessional and direct a manner as Plath, certain of her poems (particularly her later ones) express an acute, subjective sensitivity. Miller "did not become a 'confessional' poet", says Lionel Abrahams (1990). "She had

matured before that licence became available... Yet as an artist, she, perhaps more than her contemporaries was full, increasingly full as her life progressed, I believe, of the stuff of confessional poetry” (1990: 12). As will be explored in Chapter 4, Miller’s poetic trajectory spanning *Floating Island* and *Selected Poems* achieves an increasingly confessional tone. Miller’s deeply felt sense of loss results in the hierarchy of the meaning-making system (in which God features as pinnacle and lover/father pillars) collapsing. The loss of the lover becomes a re-experiencing of the loss of the father on earth and the loss of the Father in Heaven.

‘Long Since Last’ (FI: 8) portrays Miller’s acute sensitivity to a break in relationship and resulting loss of a partner. Chapman (1984) suggests that Miller’s emotional state, the pain of loneliness and separation from a loved one, is realised in contrast to an objectified past and is sharply defined in her perception of winter:

Long since last I tried remembering
You, such singing solstice-swings away.
Now it is winter and the best
Of me has shadowed with the sun. (ll. 1-4)

The cyclical, repetitive change in season is compared with the grief experience of a loss. Anguish, rather than diminishing over the course of time, is relived again and again in a season of mourning. Loss becomes the prevailing state of being and any reprieve (rays of winter sun light) is but momentary and short lived: “The cold sunlight slants into the room / So late, staying so short a while”. Her hands metonymous of her self are “abandoned” to a wilderness bereft of any meaning. She can only exist within the gaze of the lover. It is only through his recognition that she is able to acknowledge herself in any meaningful way: “To warm abandoned hands that once could lie / On a cold night in the heat of your gaze”. In her abandonment,

Miller feels the loss of both lover and logos. Miller, suggests Meterlerkamp (1991), is unable to escape the existential repercussions of this loss precisely because love is ideal allowing for Miller to make the deduction that, “The meaning generated by love [and by implication religion]...must be based on delusion and will inevitably leave one.” (1991: 43). It is within this silent space that Miller feels “unblessed”. It is as if in the act of the lover’s abandonment, God *himself* has turned his back on her and denied her any hope of benevolent transcendence.

In the poetry of both Jonker and Miller, the other takes on a meaning of increased existential significance. In ‘Long Since Last’, Miller’s self concept is defined by the gaze of the lover and in Jonker’s poem ‘I Repeat You’ (Jack Cope and William Plomer’s translation from the Afrikaans in *Selected Poems*, 1988, p. 18), Jonker’s existence is literally in her lover’s hands; he shapes and defines her person:

I repeat you
without beginning or end
I repeat your body
the day has a small shadow
and the night yellow crosses
the landscape is devoid of lustre
and the people a row of candles
whilst I repeat you
with my breasts
that take shape from the hollows of your hands

Jonker’s poem, ‘On all Faces’ (1988: 17) further represents the intensity of feeling as the world becomes unreal when all aspects of it and personages in it are reminders of the lover:

On all the faces of all people
always your eyes the two brothers
the existence of you and the unreality
of the world

all sounds reiterate your name
all edifices think it and the advertisements
the typewriters guess at it and the sirens re-echo it
every birthery affirm it and the rejection
of the world (ll. 1-9)

The lover takes on larger than life dimensions, altering the subject's perceptions and experience of reality. Jonker, like Miller, can only find a meaning for herself in the eyes of the other. It would seem that her concept of self performs a balancing act, threatening to collapse into nothing at any given moment.

The elevated status of the other and of relationship with the other receives contemplation in Miller's poem 'Trapeze' (FI: 18). This poem also articulates the ever present fear of loss in relationship expressed in the acute sensitivity of Jonker's poetry. In 'Trapeze' faith in a meaning-making system is incapable of appeasing the trapeze artists' anxiety. Miller's fear is founded on the magnitude of the loss and its perceived deathly implications. In this poem, the speaker and her partner perform a trapeze act in front of the audience of themselves. They are at one and the same time both performers and spectators, fragmented into a multitude, "We two make a multitude, a teem of faces". The pun on the word "teem" suggests that more is at stake in their partnership (their team) than what meets the eye. Their trapeze act is viewed by an audience made-up exclusively of themselves, an audience teeming with judgement. This internalised judgmental other or others is almost an overwhelming presence in the speaker's life.

The trapeze artists' act is not one of communion and, as is stated in the final line of the first stanza, "The bread and wine come after". Communion, the reminder of Christ's suffering, death, resurrection and ultimate return, can only be partaken of after an introspective examination of one's faith:

Wherefore whosoever shall eat *this* bread, and drink *this* cup of the Lord, unworthily, shall be guilty of the body and blood of the Lord. But let a man examine himself, and so let him eat of *that* bread, and drink of *that* cup. For he that eateth and drinketh unworthily, eateth and drinketh damnation to himself, not discerning the Lord's body. (*1 Corinthians 11: 27-29*)

If one drinks the wine and eats the bread of communion in an unworthy manner, one passes judgement on oneself in the failure to recognise Christ's body and, by implication, the church. According to the practise of communion, one shows one's trust in Christ and one's gratefulness for salvation. Ultimately, communion is a testimony of faith in the higher meaning-making system of Christianity. The partners' trapeze act is a figuration of their crisis in faith. There is no place for communion during this act – the introspective examination of their faith – and as a consequence communion can only take place after this questioning, depending whether or not the answers are found to be acceptable.

The trapeze act's hazardous nature is amplified by the spectators' presence. The judgement of the performance of this act correlates to the fear generated during the act. Not only do the partners suffer the anxiety of having to please the audience of themselves and live up to their own high expectations, but they also have to rely on and have faith in the safety nets below:

After we have made our peace
With the multifold, raucous
Audience of ourselves, who watch
Our dangerous swinging leaps
Above the mesh.
Will the net hold if we slip?
But at the last,
Our hands touch, grip. (stanza 2)

At the end of this stanza, the question of whether or not they have enough faith to survive a break in relationship does not have to be answered, at least not this time. By

the conclusion of the poem, love becomes a hazardous trapeze act, the loss of which is analogous with death: "we two glitter / On the platform. Safe / Above the whispers / Of our death". The partners' selves have splintered into an audience of judgemental others, watching their every move. Miller accords both partners equal status in the performance of the trapeze act. It is not divulged which partner has the safer role of catching the other. It would appear that both partners have the same loss at stake; they are each other's life lines, and their faith in one another is as equally questionable as their faith in themselves.

Metelerkamp (1991) says that the love shared between the partners exists in suspension above, not in relation to other people. As a consequence, love is idealized and placed in a lofty realm of its own. Miller places pressure on her self (and her partner) to have a successful love partnership, for a relationship is perceived as the ideal state of existence, a state in which by definition the divine manifests. The stakes balancing on their trapeze act are high: a failure in partnership is tantamount to death.

'It is Better to be Together' (FI: 40) is a further re-iteration of Miller's ideal conception of love. Miller suggests that to have a relationship, however tumultuous and "stormy" that relationship might be, is better than being alone:

It is better to be
Together. Tossed together
In a white wave, than to see
The ocean like an eagle.

It is better to lie
In the stormy seething
Than to judge the weather
In an eagle's eye. (stanzas 1 and 2)

Religious idealism is replaced by love; the creation of one's own loving heaven on earth is better than viewing earth alone, from the lofty heights of the heavens above:

Cold is the bird
Who flies too far
In the clear vision
Which saints and eagles share:
Their faraway eyes are bitter
With darkened prayer. (stanza 3)

From the above stanza, it would appear that religious belief is a threat to relationship. To have a transcendent perspective and belief in religion, requires the break-up of the couple. Religious belief has no place in their relationship, no matter how unsettling that relationship may be. Religion and relationship cannot exist in tandem. The one can only exist as a replacement of the other:

O, it is better to try
With the white wave, together
To overturn the sky. (stanza 4)

Furthermore, relationship is not only a replacement of religion, it is a facilitator to the very displacement of religion itself.

Love is Miller's new religion. Her lover becomes her logos and she is thus acutely sensitised to the possibility of rejection. The loss of relationship results in an emotional descent into a yearning nostalgia as the absence of the loved one is contemplated.

CHAPTER 4

As discussed previously, in much of her poetry, Miller expresses a subversively derisive commentary and criticism on patriarchy. This criticism most often operates in an insidiously undermining manner. It is alluded to or hinted at and for its recovery requires a little digging on the part of the interpreter who peels through layers of superficial meaning to recover the core. In contrast to these poems, 'Submarine', a later poem found in Miller's collection *Selected Poems* (1968: 47), makes an overt and confrontational commentary on patriarchy. Its tone is not one of angst, but rather anger. Cecily Lockett, in her introduction to *Breaking the Silence* (1990), an anthology of South African women's poetry, says that the source of Miller's anger is often her sense of frustration at being constrained within a male world. In 'Submarine', writes Lockett, this anger is repressed, manifesting on the symbolic level. While I agree with Lockett's proposition as to the cause of Miller's anger, I do not think that Miller's anger as expressed in 'Submarine' is in any way repressed. Although Miller channels her anger symbolically, her metaphorical figurations accentuate rather than repress her anger.

The sea imagery in 'Submarine' is powerful, contrasting with the impotence of the image of the sea suggested in Miller's 'The Anarchist', published in *Floating Island* (1965: 19). Here the sea is calm and unmoving. The speaker finds this calm unsettling and wonders at this apparent oddity, "Remember the day the sea lay calm; too calm" and in the final line of the first stanza, "The sea lay blue and cold and did not move."

At the conclusion of this poem, the speaker, troubled by the defeated sea finds a consolation in, "The fortune-teller moon in her streaming hair" who "Sandalled the silver beaches, unashamed". The female moon is unashamed to show herself in all her feminine glory. The image of the moon is contrasted with that of the appearance of a powerless sea, an image that the speaker clearly does not approve of.

An anarchist, after whom this poem is titled, is one who rebels against any authority, established order or ruling power. Is the sea's placid and flaccid appearance the case of the proverbial "calm before the storm"? Is the speaker anticipating and hoping for the sea's anarchic assumption of its power and rightful nature? If this is the case, then the images of the sea in 'Submarine' are the expression of the potent ideal; the passive and powerless observation of the speaker in 'The Anarchist' becomes an active appropriation of imaginary power by the speaker in 'Submarine'.

I cannot help but wonder at Miller's change of tone. Could her newfound forthrightness owe something perhaps to the infusion of confessional poems into mainstream poetry circulation? Miller must most certainly have read and if not known about poets Ingrid Jonker and Sylvia Plath (the majority of their work was published in the early 1960s). Perhaps it was these women poets' access to a voice free from censure that allowed for Miller's pronounced and directed assertiveness that is clearly expressed in 'Submarine'.

In the opening line of this poem, an arrogant Icarus "swaggered into his dandelion death". He did not question the authority of his father or "seed-maker", Daedalus (the crafter of his wings) and was quite literally undone by his delusional confidence in a higher jurisdiction. Although Icarus finally confronts his mortality, the "crumpled sea

was” in contrast “deathless”. Icarus’s impermanence dissolves into the immortal sea. He is reduced and engulfed, becoming an inconsequential nothing.

Man fails to conquer the heavens and attempts to overrun the sea, but in the same way his efforts come to naught. In the second stanza, “the lords of the earth and sky” move to master the depths of the ocean. The “sleek phallus”, the submarine, rams “Through forests of throttled night and rubber weed, / Packed with steel on steel, to hang there driftless”. The terms in which this image is figured suggests the invasiveness of the sexual act where the male assumes the role of potency and the female assumes the role of submission. This image can be extended further to represent the larger dominant/submissive roles adopted in male/female relationships. But the steel phallus cannot sustain its journey into the depths of the sea and, as a consequence of its violent desire to be ruler of the biblical “heavens and the earth and all they contain”, succumbs to the depths of the ocean. Miller expresses a desire for a complete overhaul and role reversal of traditional relationship dynamics.

The imagery in the first three lines of the third stanza brings to mind labour: “The sea humps, thick and crammed / Itself upon itself pressed in coiled weight; / Gathers a muscled push, one huge Laocoon heave”. It would appear that the speaker glories in this image, the one aspect of womanhood that man has no dominion over. The act of childbirth that remains an exclusive right of passage to motherhood, an act that man can never dominate because he can never know it. “Laocoon” is a Trojan protagonist represented amongst other writings in Virgil’s *Aenid*. Laocoon, writes Jobes (1961), was the son of Priam and priest of Apollo. He warned his fellow Trojans against the colossal wooden horse left by the Greeks outside the walls of the city. But, as the fall of Troy had been decreed by the gods, Laocoon and his sons were strangled by two enormous serpents that rose from the sea. Perhaps by referring to “Laocoon” as a

descriptor for the violence of the sea, the annihilation of Laocoon and his sons (a triad of patriarchy reflecting the Christian trinity of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit) is appropriated by Miller to further her image of the sea as harbourer of destructive forces. Also, Laocoon acted against the natural order of the gods and paid for it with his life just as the unnaturalness of the submarine navigating the depths of the ocean leads to the submarine's destruction. Neptune's victory over Laocoon is mirrored in the destruction of the submarine at the hands of the ocean

Finally the speaker's wish-fulfilment reaches its climax in a singularly poignant sentence: "There are no more men". The speaker's fantasy, a world free from the authority of men is voiced and captured in such outright, straightforward simplicity, it startles. The remnants of the submarine are expelled onto a white beach "Where heaven is always Up". This clause rings with spite. The remnants face upwards towards the authority of the Father in Heaven. The speaker points an angry finger upwards at God the Father. "Up" is capitalised; emphasis is placed on this word's appropriation as a hallowed space and one can imagine it enunciated as if spat out in contempt. The place of a divine knowledge that by definition can only be accessed by man is given derisive treatment. The sea is not only victorious but is annihilating, even the remains of the submarine will eventually succumb violently to the everlasting female sea.

While the persistent tides
Wait secretly to smash
Those whom dark hells in privacy corrupt. (stanza 4)

There is no softening of blows, after the submarine has yielded under the pressure of the sea, the remnants are expelled onto a white beach to be smashed by "the persistent tides". Finally hell, the flipside of heaven awaits. The one conciliation of the

presiding authority of a male heaven is that implicit in its conceptualisation is included the possibility of hell. If they want *their* Heaven, then they should also have *their* Hell. In 'Submarine', Miller makes no bones about what she feels about and finally what she wishes for *mankind*.

In 'Blue-mantled Mary' (SP: 12) the cycle of birth and death are conflated into an existential statement where death becomes the simple known surety. The speaker draws a sharp, enunciated contrast between the virgin conception and birth of Jesus with human conception, pregnancy and birth.

Mary exists for the speaker not merely as a concept, but as an image, a depicted deity: Mary is given the descriptive qualification "blue-mantled". It would seem that the speaker is referring to an artistic conception of Mary, suggesting that Mary is not a universal biblical truth, but rather an artistic construct or creation. The speaker draws attention to the pronounced use of the colour blue in depictions of Mary, be it a mantle or a halo of blue light. This styling of Mary's image originates out of the idea of associating Mary with the air and sky. In a poem lauding Mary's conception, 'The Blessed Virgin Compared to the Air we Breathe' (*Poems of Gerard Manley Hopkins*, 1948, p. 102) Hopkins alludes to the way in which the earth's atmosphere turns the energy radiating from the sun into visible light and writes as follows:

Whereas did air not make
This bath of blue and slake
His fire, the sun would shake,
A blear and blinding ball
With blackness bound, and all
The thick stars round him roll
Flashing like flecks of coal,
Quartz-fret, or sparks of salt,
In grimy vasty vault.
So God was god of old: (ll. 94-103)

Hopkins genders the sun as distinctly masculine (“His fire, the sun would shake”), casting *his* light in the darkness that results in a “bath of blue”. As a consequence, Mary’s being and the colour of the blue sky associated with her image results from a male God’s light. In ‘Blue-Mantled Mary’ Miller makes a distinct comment on how traditional conceptions and images of Mary are generated by men.

The depiction of Mary in the first stanza “bloody in the byre...The hawthorn was as white /As milk, the berries all on fire” provides a strikingly colourful description. It appears that the contrast between the Virgin conception and birth with that of the rest of humankind is not as distinct as it would at first appear. The word “bloody” is jarring, juxtaposed against an otherwise pristine and pure portrait of the Virgin. The mystical and otherworldly dimension of conception and birth is brought down and grounded in the “bloody” reality of the birthing process. At the same time as Miller deconstructs the consecrated image of the Virgin Mary by means of juxtaposing this image with reality, she also causes this image to implode internally by introducing a single word “bloody” to her otherwise flawless description of Mary’s image.

In the second stanza, the phrase “nine months waiting” is repeated, emphasising the expectance of Jesus, the long awaited Messiah and Saviour, whose birth brings the promise of redemption, revelation, resurrection and ultimate solution to the problem of death. Miller appears contemptuous of this neat resolution. She suggests instead that the concept of an immaculate conception is artificial. The repetition of this phrase emphasises and humanises the conception and birth of Jesus by drawing the reader’s attention to the human gestation period of nine months.

Stanza 3 introduces a contrasting dynamic. “Feathery thrust” is an unsettling oxymoronic image, befouling and humanising the supposed divine and otherworldly. The image drawn is not unlike that of a rape. “The angel” suggests Chapman (1984),

is an angel of death rather than life-giving force. Miller's repeated references to a tangible body and sensory perceptions "The tall touch of the stranger / On my breast, on my skin" further demythologise images of a virgin conception. "His" breath is described as being "maculate", a striking prefix-less version of the biblical "immaculate". In stanza 4, Miller again draws our attention to Mary as construct or artistic fancy, "Mary ran / ran on her pencilled feet into the light / Of the cathedral window".

Beyond the alternate reality conceptualised in the biblical nativity narrative, pregnancy remains "Unhallowed, un-Mary'd" and bereft of the promise of redemption. The additional words "- though each day is holy -" says Chapman (1984) are deeply ironic, suggesting the incomprehensible aspects of nature if one subscribes to a belief system which invests meaning in the sacredness of life. The life giving force becomes a contradiction in terms. In pregnancy, the foetus is not carried full term to life, but is rather "a full-term Death". Some readings of Miller's 'Blue-Mantled Mary' have suggested that Miller is referring to a stillborn birth. Charles Eglinton, cited in Chapman (1984), uses the idea of a dead foetus as metaphor for a cancerous growth. Michael Chapman's (1984) initial emphasis in this poem is on rape, pregnancy and birth as analogous to the growth of Miller's cancer prior to her death. In *Ruth Miller: Breaking Silences?* (1990), Chapman has revised these (what I think are mis-leading readings) taking into account autobiographical details. At the time this poem was written Miller, overshadowed by grief over the loss of her son, feared for the happiness of her daughter who had given birth to twins. This comes closer to the interpretation I would like to suggest. Miller is not speaking this phrase literally, correlating or comparing "Death" with a cancerous growth or a stillborn child, but by capitalising "Death", Miller is referring to the existential drama (not

unlike a morality play) in which Death figures as the lead character and ultimate reality. One is conceived into the inevitability of death, an inevitability suggests Miller, which seems to rid birth of any transcendence and consequently rob life of any hope.

The cycle of birth and death is a primary thematic concern for Miller in 'Blue-Mantled Mary', a concern that is repeated in 'Voicebox' (SP: 7). Birth and death initially appear to be juxtaposed according to the present and the remembrances of the past that the present evokes, but the relationship between birth and death in this poem is revealed in a more complicated manner. Death eclipses and overshadows birth, casting darkness over any promise of a new beginning.

While the speaker's friend is on possibly what is soon to be her deathbed, the poet contemplates the prospect of her friend having her voicebox removed. During her contemplation, she remembers an image of the birth of her friend's child: "I recall her in the suffusion of one morning / With her firstborn in the incredible bed". The death bed is associated with the birthing bed. In the speaker's mind, birth is never free from the presence and possibility of death.

The birthing of the older friend's baby is "biblical". Indeed, much of the diction of the first stanza is biblical, "loins" is borrowed from "fruit of my loins" and "Furrowed with grooves of valley legs and loins" brings to mind psalm 23 verse 4: "Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for thou *art* with me; thy rod and thy staff-they comfort me" (*The Holy Bible*). This psalm both celebrates and calls upon the omnipotent presence of God in times of hardship and strife. It is within the shadow cast by death that birth takes place. Indeed, this entire poem (and many of Miller's other poems) is conceptualised within the shadow of death. Miller's probably unconscious allusion to this psalm is indicative

of her desire for God's merciful presence even though what is to follow is seemingly a repudiation of God and "all his mercies". It would seem that Miller comments on this paradox, unable to resign her self to this implicit inevitability, where even mercy is eventually powerless to change fate.

The figure of the father is relegated to the sidelines of the birthing process in stanza 2. As in 'Submarine', Miller glories in the power of the mother in the birthing image in contrast to the impotent father who becomes merely the passive observer: "I who gawked in my teens at the useless father / Occasionally hovering, shamed as an old bull". The birth is somewhat of a revelation for Miller. Unlike the father, she is able to vicariously share the mother's experience of labour, "We were afloat, she and I, on revealed meanings". The "revealed meanings" of labour occur in a space uninhabited by the father figure. They are exclusively shared between the women and suggest alternative meta-meanings in opposition to the other meaning-making system of men, Judea-Christian religion.

In the third stanza, Miller redirects her musings from the past back to the present. "Time" is capitalised and personified. God, the time-keeper of life is embodied in the figure of "Time" and death becomes only a matter of time. Perhaps just as Miller is able to share her friend's experience of birth so too does she find a similar correspondence in the experience of death.

The voicebox of the friend which is soon to be removed becomes a metaphorical toy in stanza 5, bringing to mind images of childhood, but: "Soon they will take away the little toy" and the innocence of childhood will be robbed and as a result, effaced by death. Death, the ultimate victor, becomes the inevitable conclusion of one's birth. The friend's voice, the tool that speaks subjectivity into being ("I am, I want, I must, I shall"), the very essence of her existence is awaiting removal. The speaker is plunged

as a result into introspective speculation where she foresees a fearful confrontation with the face of death. But, at the same time as her friend is acquainted with deathly experience, the speaker seems to nullify the distinction between the innocence of birth (and childhood that follows) with the experience of death. The poet's friend "Must lie in the ward like a baby". Death and birth do not form an easy dichotomy as would appear to be suggested, but rather birth and death are bedfellows (the birthing bed is to become, one is to assume, the death bed). Not only can one not exist without the other, but one is the other. Birth equals death in a life effacing equation where only nothing is left.

The image of "The cracked egg of the baby's skull" (stanza 1) is repeated in stanza 8: "Cracking the skull of the egg into the pan / We'll watch the pure globe grow out of God's hand". The speaker foresees that in the future the cycle of birth and death will be repeated again and again. Although God will be praised time upon time: "for all his mercies" He will also be cursed. This phrase, said in an ironic tone, suggests that death and suffering are unmerciful and that God, by allowing inhumane suffering, is eventually not worthy of praise.

By the conclusion of the poem, the speaker speculates on her friend's post-operative condition, suggesting that she will become a spectacle, a circus act: "Perhaps she will learn to nod, to nod her head/ Like a circus horse tossing" and God is the ring master of this bizarre performance. The friend's pending confrontation with death brings to mind Miller's own fears and she says: "Perhaps she will learn the patience / To wipe with a damp cloth the fear from our mouths". What will the friend say? Will she "learn to nod"? How will she communicate? Her visitors will literally silence their fears by kissing her "on her breaking lips" before she has a chance to speak.

As in her earlier *Floating Island* poems discussed extensively in Chapter 2, Miller is pre-occupied with the iconoclastic project of breaking down false gods but without filling the gaping space left behind. Although she hints at the possibility of finding a new meaning in the shared communion amongst women, her primary concern not only in 'Voicebox', but in 'Blue-Mantled Mary' and 'Submarine' too, is giving voice (often in anger) to the inadequacies of a meaning-making system that imposes its authority on her subjectivity.

In 'Voice.Silence.Echo' (SP: 23) the speaker, as in 'Voicebox', expresses the idea of the voice as an integral part of one's identity. But whence does this voice originate? While a voice may give us more information about someone's subjectivity or bring us closer to him or her as suggested in 'Voicebox', it may also stir up feelings of alienation and uncertainty especially, as the poet suggests in 'Voice.Silence.Echo' if it is the supposed Voice of God.

The poem begins with the sentence "The voice speaks". "Voice" is used as the personified subject rather than the more normative object of the sentence. This indicates how "the voice" has an authority that transcends subjectivity. Indeed, the voice that is speaking may well be the voice of God, the biblical voice that in Deuteronomy serves as the metonymous indicator of God's greater presence: "The LORD spake unto you out of the midst of the fire: ye heard the sound of words but saw no similitude; only ye heard a voice." (Deuteronomy 4:12, *The Holy Bible*). In Old Testament biblical representations, God's presence is alluded to but never made manifest and as a consequence, His voice is equated with the authority of His subjectivity.

The voice speaks leaving a cacophony of echoes in its wake, "Echo answers echoes". The echoes are distorted simulacra of the voice; after God speaks, only

interpretations of His word are left in His wake. But, the speaker of the poem appears to suggest that the silence is even more telling than the voice and the echoes, "But / What does the Silence say? What does the singer / Sing that is more accurate and pure / Than the silence after the echoes have fallen?". The poet suggests rhetorically that no celebratory song or rejoicing in biblical meaning can possibly mean as much as the silence for "The silence is as determined and predetermined/ As the sound". In contrast to the known and telling silence, the origins of echo cannot be verified, "Echo is the unknown, / For who could tell which arch would throat and gulf". The poet suggests that "Kyrie" and "Credo", the voiced incantations of faith that form part of a church service are mere echoes of an original voice that can never be known or heard and thus never believed.

In the fourth stanza and the two following it, the focus of the poem shifts from describing the Voice of God to describing the voice of the poet:

I am the instrument, I
 Am the timbre, the shiver.
 I answer as I reply
 And seeking, discover.

I am the space, the pause
 Where the jostled motes quiver,
 The stilled mothwing, whose gauze
 In the white silence hovers.

I am the child who is born
 Of strong father, pale mother.
 My voice whether proud or forlorn
 They created. And smother. (stanzas 4, 5 and 6)

In stanza 4, the subject's personhood is figured as an instrument: "I am the instrument", an instrument tuned to play homage in reply to the voice. But stanza 5 in contrast becomes the antithesis; "I" is "the space, the pause" and rather than being

played, reacts in mute silence to the voice. Stanza 6 suggests a synthesis of the dialectic initiated in the preceding couple of stanzas. "My voice" can be read in two ways: it refers to the conceptualisation of the poet's voice as echo of parental authority or the idea that her voice is able to break free from authority. Her voice, the poet says, was given life through the procreation "Of strong father, pale mother", suggesting that the mother's authority quite literally pales in comparison to that of the father. The creation of her own voice owes much to the authority of the father, but the creation of her voice, her received ideas become smothering. At the same time as the speaker articulates and lays blame on creative authority for the smothering of her voice, she uses her poetic voice to smother the voice created by the authority of her f/Father.

The singular voice suggested in the preceding stanzas becomes the presence of multiple "Voices" in the seventh stanza. These voices "announce and announce / Their coming, their assignations / Their cunning affirmations and denials". The voices are the multitudinous embodiment of the authority of God in His many followers. The "Voices" are the spoken prayers, affirmations and praises of this authority. The speaker suggests that the voices are all talk and incite no meaningful action, though they ignite hope for action ("But / When the echo dies away, then the Silence"). The Silence speaks a prayer, a prayer that will prove whether or not God was listening. The poet asks: Is God, the voice and speaker of truths capable of listening? In answer to this question she responds, "Can't you hear the echo / Of His immense reply, echoing No". God speaks, but does not listen to prayers. Furthermore, not even God's undistorted voice is heard in reply, only the echo of his voice. However, the speaker isn't satisfied with this equivocation and ends the stanza by introducing a contradictory thought initiated with the word "But":

If God is here and God is love
(whose No we choose to take as Yes)
Whose Voice is God's the echo of
In Silences of what abyss?

The first line of this stanza stands in opposition to the poem's previous conceptualisation of God; that is to say the Old Testament articulation of his Voice but not His presence, and Miller places in contradiction Old and New Testament constructs of God. In the first line, God is Christ, the incarnate deity ("God is here") who was born into the world and inscribed in the Gospels as love. (As mentioned previously in Chapter 3, equating love with God is an implicit tenet of the New Testament scriptures. John 4: 7-12 describes this occurrence: "love is of God; and everyone that loveth is born of God, and knoweth God. He that loveth not, knoweth not God; for God is love...Beloved, if God loved us, we ought to love one another...If we love one another, God dwelleth in us, and his love is perfected in us" (*The Holy Bible*). In this New Testament moment, God *was* listening as He sent His son to redeem us from our sins. The problematics of these two belief systems becomes apparent when we try to decide to whom one ascribes original authority: God's voice in the Old Testament? Or the voice made manifest in the New Testament? The speaker suggests that Christianity, with its belief in an incarnate deity (son of God) who represents pure love, is a deception resulting from an inability or an unwillingness to face up to reality, the "No we choose to take as Yes". The ultimate disturbing reality is in effect the chaos that exists beyond the meaning of God. In the concluding couple of lines, both Testaments are nullified in the abysmal silence of non-meaning.

The futility of the celebration of faith in song is a corresponding theme in 'Silent the Singer' (FI: 12). In this poem, the singer has been silenced by the questioning of

her faith ("Silent the singer, closed the tongue / To sound"). The singer who once sang faith filled songs of praise sings no more. Only the memory of her faith exists as her "unwavering" faith yields to a "devouring" hopelessness.

The second stanza of 'Silent the Singer' opens with an image suggesting violent anger that "Curled the fingers, in a fist". The subject of the speaker's observations is outraged by what once was her blinding faith. The image in the first stanza of the Cathedral "Whose altars candle upright prayers" is re-iterated in its gothic pillars which "reached / Toward a known heaven", both suggest the purposeful striving to reach communion with God. But the act of having faith and "singing praise" is now meaningless as "There remains no cause". In the final 3 lines, the poet includes and speaks for the reader in her observation: "We cannot hold / anything for long; the cold / Whitens the knuckles which knock on open doors". This image ties in with the opening image of the "fist" in the first line of this stanza. The fingers are curled in a fist so as to knock on the door and achieve entrance to meta-meaning. This image is also a possible reference to the Christian trope of Christ requesting entrance into one's heart, "Behold, I stand at the door, and knock: if any man hear my voice, and open the door, I will come in to him, and will sup with him, and he with me" (Revelations 3: 20, *The Holy Bible*). The door through which Jesus desires to enter can only be opened from the inside and it is up to the person on the inside of the door whether or not he/she wants to allow Jesus to cross the threshold in his/her heart. By the conclusion of the poem, knocking on the door turns out to be a futile action. It is impossible, the poet suggests, to hold on to one's religious beliefs. Having faith is as pointless an act of belief as the action of knocking on a door that is already open. Furthermore, it is natural for one to lose one's belief rather than have faith; after all, it is the inevitability of the change in season, "the cold" that "Whitens the knuckles".

Throughout her poetry, Miller embarks on an iconoclastic project destroying patriarchal systems of meaning making. As has been made mention of previously in Chapter 2, Miller often adopts (paradoxically) the voices she so wishes to destroy in the very voicing of her dissent. The voices of her literary forefathers: Shakespeare, Milton, Hopkins, Frost, Yeats and Auden (to name those cited in this dissertation) are engaged with, and given voice to, particularly in Miller's earlier poetry.

However, in her later collection, *Selected Poems* (1968), Miller begins to find her own voice in the attempt to free it from traditional biblical and literary voices of authority. She also appears to draw inspiration from her female literary contemporaries, namely Plath and Jonker. The break with authority results in a change of tone from angst to anger (as was demonstrated in 'Submarine') and in, 'Voice.Silence.Echo', the questioning of the origins of authority. In effect, Miller becomes aware of the dialogic composition of her voice.

In 'Dialectic', an uncollected poem included in *Ruth Miller: Poems, Prose, Plays* (1990: 106), the speaker explores the possibility of embracing two conceptions of two differing subjectivities spanning two stanzas. Both subjective states articulate a response to apathetic weariness. In the first, the speaker identifies with God:

Tired of millenia, like God, I long for worlds
Unpeopled, cool with mists, and slowly swinging
In a warm space of nothing, where no heat
Engenders no energy no light no spiralling;
Only an endless spinning, smoke-enwreathed
With gentle vapours pearling the white air.

The God she identifies with is the God of passive inactivity and nothingness, "where no heat/ Engenders no energy no light no spiralling". Identification with God facilitates a peaceful surrender to the nothingness of being.

In the second stanza, the speaker identifies with the dialectical opposite of God, the Devil:

Tired of millennia, like the Devil, I
Grow strong on God's vast ennui, and daring
Flicker of horns and hoof, I kick my heels
In thunder through the silent peace, go blundering
With lightnings through the spirals, till they whiten
Like filaments, with flame; for God and I to share.

Instead of surrendering to apathy, the speaker grows "strong on God's vast ennui". Action in stanza 2 is juxtaposed with the passivity of stanza 1, disrupting any form of desire for peaceful acceptance of her fate (and faith). She goes "blundering / With lightnings through the spirals", an image of empowerment driven by blinding anger, leaving enflamed destruction in her wake. The speaker desires to wreak havoc, projecting her anger onto and into God's lofty heights.

By the conclusion of the poem, a powerful subjectivity resonates. The speaker does not lament her status as a victim of circumstance but rather becomes an empowering victimizer, seeking God's destruction.

In all the poems included in this chapter, the original creators of meta-meaning (be it biblical and/or mythological) are taken to task as Miller desires to break their ties with human subjectivity and in so doing claim a voice free of patriarchal authority.

'Galatea' (SP: 19) is an apt poetic example of this intent:

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

Metelerkamp (1991) says that 'Galatea' suggests Miller's sense of imprisonment. Metelerkamp's reading of this poem is indicative of her overall understanding of Miller's poetry of which she says, "[that] we need to understand Miller's feelings of impotence in terms of the father's law she is unable to challenge without self-defeat is crucial" (1991: 137). This may be a correct synopsis of Miller's earlier poetry, but I do not think that all of her poetry subscribes to as self-defeating a thesis as Metelerkamp proposes. There is more to 'Galatea' than Metelerkamp's reading suggests. Although in this poem Miller articulates a subject's entrapment at the hands of an imposing authority, included in the expression of this entrapment is a means to negotiate this bind.

In the first stanza, Galatea and Pygmalion exchange looks in a show down where the stakes are authority over Galatea's subjectivity. The "Glacial" gaze of Galatea meets Pygmalion's bold stare. The descriptive qualifier for Galatea in the first line "Glacial" suggests a frozen mass of water, a potential power that works slowly and insidiously. Furthermore, the adjective "Glacial", as in "icy stare" connotes a look of disdain. Galatea manifests a potentiality (indicated by her scorn), a potentiality that can be harnessed if she has a true understanding of herself.

Galatea, suggests the poet, does not know anything unless she knows her origins as construct. (According to Greek Mythology, Galatea owes her origins to Pygmalion who fashioned her out of ivory and fell in love with his own creation. At his request, Aphrodite gave the statue life. Galatea, after causing so much mischief for her want of worldly knowledge, was eventually returned to her original shape [Jobes, 1961].)

The male gaze, "Pygmalion's bold/ Stare" transforms Galatea's subjectivity into subservience rather than self-service and the "truth" of her own authority is destroyed by Pygmalion. The truth is, Pygmalion's "truth" is as cold as his stare. Pygmalion

instigates creative authority at the expense of Galatea's subjectivity and it is crucial, suggests the poet, that Galatea understands this dynamic so that she can exert her own creative potentiality and authority as independent subject.

Galatea is left wanting in stanza 2. She is "brittle", "eaten" and "thirsting". She has suffered, but she does not give in to authority. Her spirit is not broken and her force is not lessened.

Finally, in the concluding line of the poem, the poet's assumption of her subjectivity, her "I", is juxtaposed with the general observation made in the preceding lines. The poet assumes her own authoritative voice as she identifies in the first person with Galatea. She recognises how not only Pygmalion's gaze but his touch has shaped her subjectivity and, in this very recognition of her enforced subservience to his creative authority, is empowered.

Metelerkamp writes of Miller in her final words to *Ruth Miller and the Poetry of Loss*, "she was blinded to her own possibilities" (1991: 138). After close scrutiny of a sample of Miller's body of work covering a spectrum of earlier and later poems, I feel this pronouncement is not entirely apt. Towards the end of her poetic trajectory, Miller recognises her subjectivity and begins to claim her own voice, her "I". Her poetry progressively achieves an increasingly personal and confessional tone. This development is initialised by her awareness of her own creative power as well as her growing awareness of the other voices and forces that shape this power. Judith Gardiner, cited in Metelerkamp (1992) writes: "the sense of authorship is dependent upon having an inside (holding oneself); without it, desire becomes depersonalised mere drive... The ability to hold oneself gives to every act its authority, purposefulness in regard to the other, its authenticity for the self" (1992: 68). Miller's dissent and entrapment in patriarchal, biblical meta-narratives, the Word, is not only

exposed or transferred (as the poems analysed in Chapters 2 and 3 suggest respectively), but has begun to be negotiated if only in the very recognition of her own creative authority, her own words, her “I”. Perhaps the greatest tragedy of Ruth Miller’s poetry is that she died before she had the opportunity to immerse herself in the joy and comfort finding meaning in her own voice might have offered.

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