THE UNIVERSITY *of* EDINBURGH

The Oracular Abject: An Aut0theoretical Approach to Theory and Process in the *Noracle*

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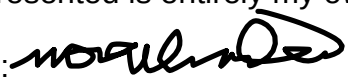
A thesis submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in English Literature

University of Edinburgh
August 2023

Table of Contents

I declare that this thesis has been composed solely by myself and that it has not been submitted, in whole or in part, in any previous application for a degree. Except where stated otherwise by reference or acknowledgment, the work presented is entirely my own.

Signed: 
Date: 08/08/2023

Abstract

The *Noracle* is an experimental memoir as well as a version of the ancient Chinese book of divination the *I Ching*. In sixty-four concrete prose poems I follow the six-stanza, varying broken/solid line shapes of the original *I Ching* hexagrams to tell stories from my painful childhood and early adulthood in New York City; the vertigo the combination of form and content produces is meant to recreate a sense of trauma, reflection and finally repositioning, inviting the reader to maintain mindful poise while experiencing confusion and pain. The subject matter, like the original *I Ching*, is occupied with meaning, morals and fate. The writing, though lyrical, has a quality of inescapable density, relying heavily on personal symbolism and an internal logic that is not always easy for the reader to grasp; this produces an intentional fug meant to mimic the drug-infused atmosphere of my upbringing. Like the original, the *Noracle* can be 'consulted' as an oracle, i.e. read randomly from any page. Further, each line has an individual negative or positive connotation, that if approached in the fashion of the *I Ching* will give an answer that I tried to align with the original 'fortune'. When read through from beginning to end, the *Noracle* aims to tells a story of hope that isn't reliant on happy endings or justice, but rather on being in the present and appreciating every instant of being alive, no matter how disorienting or frightening.

'The Oracular Abject' is a reflection on the themes of the *Noracle*, and to a lesser extent my other works to date. Using Julia Kristeva's feminist psychoanalytic concept of the developmental stage of abjection, I examine how my dissociation from childhood trauma has made me the anti-form writer I am in style, practice and end product. Looking at the prevalence of the Hero's Journey story as our hegemonic model of meaning-making and utilising Laura Fournier's theory of autotheory, I use Barthian mini-essays and an emphatic Kristevan tone to build on/unearth the topic of what writing about my past has been for me, and how it is, to quote the epigraph I've chosen by Jabès, 'the opposite of imagining'.

Lay Summary

The *Noracle* is an experimental memoir as well as a version of the ancient Chinese book of divination the *I Ching*. In sixty-four concrete prose poems I follow the six-stanza, varying broken/solid line shapes of the original *I Ching* hexagrams to tell stories from my painful childhood and early adulthood in New York City. Each line has an individual negative or positive connotation, that if approached in the fashion of the *I Ching* will give an answer that I tried to align with the original 'fortune'. When read through from beginning to end, the *Noracle* aims to tells a story of hope that isn't reliant on happy endings or justice, but rather on being in the present and appreciating every instant of being alive, no matter how disorienting or frightening. It is accompanied by an essay, 'The Oracular Abject', in which, using Julia Kristeva's feminist psychoanalytic concept of the developmental stage of abjection, I examine how my dissociation from childhood trauma has made me the anti-form writer I am (in general, and specifically in the *Noracle*).

‘Writing is the opposite of imagining’

Jabès, *The Book of Margins*

What is the *Noracle*?

The *Noracle* is a book of prose poetry. It's an auto-fictional version of the ancient Taoist classic the *I Ching* that covers some of my literary, intellectual, psychological and spiritual history using a non-linear structure. I wrote it over the course of six years, as a Creative Writing PhD. It was meant to take three years but I was diagnosed with late-stage colon cancer at forty-six and had to take a leave of absence. I was not sure I would return.

What started as a retelling of my childhood and life before I left New York City at twenty-nine, evolved into something that felt more crucial if I was to survive: an investigation of why I became the person I became, what part karma played, and where my past was leading me. I had long struggled with a roiling resentment of the traditional stories we are peddled, those that involve resolution and the honouring of hard work and good deeds. My experience had proven exactly the opposite, and yet I battled my bitterness bitterly. It was hard to exist.

My life as a person and in my chosen career as a writer had been an exercise in disappointment, one in which I had relied on perceived wisdom at the expense of listening to myself. Because of the circumstances of my childhood I was given to Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder and sought meaning in unusual places, placing my trust in sites of chance, like the *I Ching*, or tarot cards. In my late teens and early twenties I also believed fervently in the novel, but that passed with the publication of my first two works – both novels – that were not well received; or to be more precise,

barely received at all. All along I was assured by other more successful writers that this was just the way it went, but that never made it feel right to me. I needed more. It was my childhood repeating itself in my career. I was unheard and misconstrued. I believe this dharmic agony caused my cancer, or at least, caused me to accept others' advice to ignore symptoms and to believe as they did that I was just damaged and hysterical. In my history there is no distinction between mind, body, and spirit.

When I began the *Noracle* I was already beyond disenchanted with the love of my life, writing. I had left an abusive partner and had no income and had also applied for a degree in arts psychotherapy, for which I was going to take out a loan. When I heard that I had funding for this PhD, with a teenaged daughter at home, I knew I had to accept this avenue and throw myself back into a process that was not only painful, but thankless. I tried to convince myself that recounting episodes from my childhood would be healing, because that is the shallow received wisdom. As usual I second-guessed myself. As I wrote the PhD I suffered greatly, but I wanted to produce the best work I could. Giving up, prior to my diagnosis, was not an option; afterwards, I began to think differently. But here I am.

The *Noracle* is meant to stand as a collection of single pieces, as well to be read through from beginning to end. It mirrors the *I Ching* in that it comprises sixty-four hexagrams, a hexagram being a symbol of six lines, either broken or unbroken. The hexagrams are arrived at by combining two three-line halves on top of each other (called the upper and lower trigrams) representing one of eight variations dictated by its imagery and 'family

relationship' (Wilhelm *li).* They are heaven, earth, thunder, water, mountain, wind, fire, lake; and (respectively) father, mother, first son, second son, third son, first daughter, second daughter, third daughter. In my version I did not stick to these symbols though I developed themes throughout, some elemental, many familial.

The hexagrams in the *Noracle* do not progress chronologically, nor does the *I Ching*. The *Noracle* is ordered in such a way as to indicate an expanding intellectual and spiritual understanding by building a non-linear story, one that draws on an awareness of the Buddhist/Taoist concepts of karma and interdependence and non-duality that have helped me navigate my pain. In its final shape the *Noracle* has become a farewell to the self. Mine was self-constructed, as the *Noracle* chronicles, out of my relationship with reading, writing, and the need to be heard.

What is the *I Ching*?

In brief, the *I Ching* is an ancient Taoist Chinese form of divination, estimated to have originated around 1000 BC. Its title can be translated as *The Book of Changes*. It is made up of sixty-four oracles, which the reader arrives at by tossing coins (or yarrow sticks) six times. Each toss yields either a broken or a solid line and the order of these six lines determines which hexagram of the sixty-four will answer the reader's question. Each line can have the characteristic of being 'changing' or 'unchanging'. If the coins fall a certain

way, the changing lines have a particular meaning beyond the general oracle of the hexagram.

For Westerners the *I Ching* tends to be relegated to the category of the Tarot: something you consult when you want to sequester the unknown, when probability and reason isn't palatable (or in my case, bearable). By which I mean we ask the *I Ching* about love, fate, health, things 'beyond our control'. The last category applies more to the disenfranchised and unlucky than it does to most. There is a reason divination and conspiracy theories are popular with outcasts: reason and order apply less when you're on the wrong end of institutional unfairness.

I first came to the *I Ching* as a twenty-something and have used it as a receptacle for my OCD impulses ever since. It's relevant that the Hero's Journey, a motif I'll address throughout this essay, was brought to the Western public's attention initially by Carl Jung, he who invented psychological archetypes and was a darling of the '60s New Age movement. Jung was also responsible for popularising the *I Ching* and wrote the introduction to the first English translation. In the context of this essay I am not referencing Campbell's original text per se, but rather its cultural treatment, the elevation that the paradigm of the story structure he outlined occupies in the cultural imagination, and its often unexamined dominance.

To illustrate how the *I Ching* works with an example from the Wilhelm translation (which is the oldest in English, the one I usually use), if I were to ask 'what will the reader think of this essay?' I might receive hexagram fifty-six, The Wanderer, whose judgement is 'success through smallness'. It

cautions that one should not assume to know more than one does, because one is ‘a stranger in a strange land’ where modesty will win one more success than showing off (Wilhelm 216-218). If I received changing lines one and five, the oracle (another way of referring to the *I Ching* and how it often refers to itself) would add that the wanderer needs to resist focusing on trivial things, and that one can find a way of fitting in and even prospering if one follows local customs. What that would actually mean as an answer to my original question would be, as is the case with all oracles, entirely open to interpretation. My own (or ‘personal’) reading would be that I am not writing this in the standard way and will pay for it.

The *Noracle* version of this hexagram would tell the reader the same thing, but problematising it, and using different symbolism. In changing line five where Wilhelm writes of the wanderer finding his way in a new land by ‘shooting a pheasant’ and ‘achieving praise and high office’ (219), I explain:

> We were led through the strip-lit back corridors of Disneyland, then out onto the smooth diamond chip American pavement to a waiting, air-conditioned cop car. The officer making small talk, and my dad and Reb too, like the well brought up upper middle-class kids they were. (56)

On an ill-begotten cross-country trip my family has been rescued by an authority figure, when moments before we were our utterly marginalised, endangered and precarious selves. In this changing line we are saved by my father and his girlfriend’s class and educational status; the *I Ching*’s high office becomes fancy sidewalks and an air-conditioned cop-car. How might

this apply to the original question about this essay? I'd read it as a positive omen, that by making myself clear from the get-go I will be able to speak in a voice that feels true. I may not achieve praise and high office, but I am here, in the cop car, and safer than I was. But I am also saying that the safety of being accepted isn't all it's cracked up to be, and what gets one accepted must always be kept in mind.

I also made sure throughout that my version could be used as an oracle by lining up the meanings of the changing lines with the original. I did wonder if it was worth it, as anyone actually seeking an oracle to hear whether their partner was cheating or if they should bid on a house was very unlikely to consult the *Noracle* instead of the real thing, but I stuck to my plan and it can work that way for those who choose to try it out.

As to why I decided to write a version of the *I Ching*, I did so because it was suggested to me by my partner at the time who noticed that I compulsively asked it questions, or 'consulted it'. Initially, I was resistant to the idea of writing a version as I have always felt the *I Ching* is a little bit of a joke, that there is no such thing as an oracle, after all, and I hardly am one. Needless to say, the title is tongue in cheek.

Still, I do have an uncanny ability to read people and situations because of the need for hypervigilance in my childhood. And my OCD was a balm then as it is now. To this day, when I ask the *I Ching* for its guidance I am seeking the sober adult voice, a voice that will give order to my inner world, which is no different from the outer world, where nothing is orderly or predictable. As Louise Glück put it in her poem 'Nostos':

> We look at the world once, in childhood.
>
> The rest is memory. (342)

Thank God for Lauren Fournier!

Lauren Fournier's *Autotheory as Feminist Practice in Art, Writing and Criticism* has allowed me to write this essay as myself. Her newly-defined subject (though not newly invented) makes space for ideas raised by critical theory to be addressed in terms that challenge the academic, allowing the writer/artist to engage with theory using structures, forms, tones, words and punctuation (!) that problematise traditional approaches to academic /theoretical writing/discourse. Fournier explains autotheoretical practice as an explicitly political act:

> Theory… is a discourse embedded in academic institutions that might be seen as inaccessible – at best daunting, at worst hostile and violent – to certain publics, including those that are neurodivergent, living with mental illness, are survivors of sexual violence… [Autotheory is] a fundamentally politicised mode of feminist writing that makes space for those who have been inordinately marginalised to engage in the practice of theorizing and to redefine what it means to theorize. (25-26)

I fall into every category Fournier describes as ‘certain publics’. Raised by drug addicts, I am a survivor of sexual, physical and emotional trauma, as well as neglect. I’ve been diagnosed with many psychological disorders at different times: Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder (OCD), Chronic Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (CPTSD), Dysthymia and Borderline Personality Disorder (BPD). My twenty-two-year-old daughter has recently suggested that I’m autistic; she has ‘researched’ on YouTube and says autistic women are often misdiagnosed as having BPD. Still, for various reasons owing to the environment in which I was raised, I learned to present myself to the world as well-spoken, rational, a good student. ‘Cool as a cucumber’ was how my mother described me. As a child, drugged adults often marvelled at my eye-of-the-storm calm. I was called an ‘old soul’. This assumed calm was not enlightenment. It was the ‘freeze’ in the fight, flight, freeze or fawn paradigm of trauma (Walker 12) and manifested in an inescapable compulsion to downplay trauma. Latterly, I have been trying to upend many of the defence mechanisms that have kept me from speaking up. This essay and the *Noracle* itself are one such chance. To champion the order in the seeming chaos of my own voice, the reason in the apparent unreason.

Why the Zero in Her0?

Let’s start with a note on my neurodivergence: the above word ‘hero’ is a such a meaningful typo I’ve chosen to explore it.

I wrote Her0 when I meant Aut0.

That heading should read: Why the Zero in Aut0?

I edited it several times and still did not see any error. Why? I can't be sure, but I can guess. In the first instance, zero is spelled like auto, sort of. Four letters. Ends in 'o'. And I have always been a horrendous speller. Not that I would confuse auto and zero, but I'm conscious of a crouching threat when I look at any word: is it the word I think it is? And words get lumped into groups. These are in the same group.

As hexagram two, 'The Receptive', or my version, 'Reading', points out, I could not read until I was nine. There was a great deal of anxiety surrounding this, as both my parents were big readers, and we were from what I used to call the 'lumpen intelligentsia'. When I finally started reading I always felt there was a rush, that I had a lot of catching up to do, so I still read and write with a sense of anxiety. I still feel I might not *actually* know how to read or write on some deep level.

The Jewish, exiled Egyptian-French writer Edmund Jabès, for whom writing was more elusive than voice, wrote: '*(Words rush in and knock everything over. They want, each to get their chance to convince… Under their pens vowels are like fish mouths on the hook, out of water… They live cramped in their deeds, in their hovels of ink…)'* (*Questions* 65). Maybe I'd even press further than Jabès and assert that I don't know *how* to read or write because both are processes that feel more like they are happening to me than being performed by me. This is something I find it impossible to express logically and have written about at length, though not explicitly. I

know it seems clear – whoever wrote this can both read and write – but inside I never feel as if I am reading or writing; I feel like I am translating something true into a lie, one that claims to communicate but does not. You can feel the irrational panic in this crazy assertion I'm sure, and I want you to. Here is someone writing saying they can't write. What's happening? I'm creating confusion, abjection, possibly even annoyance. Is it intentional? Yes, but it feels unavoidable. I want to exemplify and embody the frustration and fear that I feel when writing by drawing attention to this typo. It's a strange typo, too. An unnerving and uncanny little typo. Like a little wound.

Semantically, whenever I hear the word 'hero' I hear the phrase 'a hero ain't nothin' but a sandwich', which was the title of a young adult novel I read when I was nine and had just started reading (Childress). It was about a kid, a Black thirteen-year-old heroin addict. In NYC, where I grew up, a hero is a big sandwich with lots of stuff on it. I loved the wryness of the title, and that words could pun. That wry could be rye bread! This was the level of my wordplay at that age, but it felt so warm. I had found a connection. (I would have preferred a person but language was better than nothing.) Language was a place where I could say things that were hard to say, a spot where I sounded clear but was able to use words to mean many things, contradictory things. From the moment I could read, I read things many ways because even before I could speak I knew that words were mostly used for not telling the truth.

What I said was consistently misinterpreted. If I said I was hungry I was told I should wait a while and that my eyes were bigger than my stomach. If

I said I was sad I was told I was a cry-baby or being sneaky. My recollection of events was consistently discredited to the point that I usually thought I was mad. To use a trendy expression, I was gaslit. It is the realm of the gaslighter to convince the gaslightee, using logic and tricks, that what they claim to be experiencing isn't real or reasonable, that it is all in their head. The term originates from the 1938 play *Gas Light* where the villain gets up to all manner of bad deeds to convince the heroine she is going mad. In my experience gaslighting has been very effective, its techniques having been used to argue with things I try to assert: feelings, thoughts, moods. In this way, reason has been wielded, weaponised even, against me. It is easy to discredit someone who is agitated. The tortured and oppressed do speak from agitation, and it takes more effort to break things down and explain them clearly. By the time the trauma passes, one (or at least this one) just wants to never think about it again, so the only time to speak up is in the moment the pain is occurring. Furthermore, in my case, I was abused more when I spoke up, so it was doubly terrifying. The upshot of all this was that I saw myself as responsible for my own situation. I learned to say what needed to be said, which depended on the listener entirely. This is what I was trying to capture when I wrote in my anti-epic epic poem, *The Minnow Would be Lost*:

> All my life I've been trying to not tell the truth and not to lie.
> I knew speaking the truth would make me ugly but lying was
> out of the question. Every sentence hurts to compose, *but it*
> *can be done*. (103)

There is a scene in my final, unfinished, novel, *The Geographic*, my favourite scene in fact, in which a toddler throws a metal eggbeater out of her play pen, one that has been put in for her to amuse herself, but that she keeps sitting on and that is hurting her. Her grandmother puts it back in, repeatedly, thinking the toddler is throwing it out so that it will be put back in; thinking she is playing a game. In the next scene, much affected by her inability to communicate, the toddler realises that the word she has been using to mean everything – 'light' – only means one thing. She is devastated at how many words she will have to learn, so vast is the internal universe she will need to translate. Looking back on that section now I can see it was a metaphor for gaslighting. What is causing the child pain is interpreted as a game. Having no power to change this, the child turns to language to try and speak, but language itself is an insurmountable barrier. Jabès likes to call it a wound (Ploeg 109).

My relationships to speaking, reading and writing have always been fraught with fear of failing, certainty of being misconstrued, and a deep shame, a disgust even; what Julia Kristeva calls the psychological state of 'abjection' in her book *Powers of Horror*. Observing how language seemed so easy for others added a layer of dark humour to the proceedings, to all my experience in fact, and is probably what made life bearable, and is certainly what made me a writer. But I was only a writer because I am really, more than anything else, a reader.

So, in part thanks to *A Hero Ain't Nothin' but a Sandwich*, from very early on I felt there was a language, a dialogue, between a book and myself, a

safe liminal space that excluded even the author, because their words told me more about them then they could ever know. Reading made me feel in control, much more than speaking or writing did. And reading is what accounts for my naturally occurring oracular tone; when I read *I know*.

A Hero… was one of the first books I loved because I felt I was the protagonist, though on the surface I was nothing like him. It was banned in schools because the kid's POV was too gritty, too much for America in the '70s when it came out. My mind repeating that phrase every time I hear the word hero, throughout my whole life, however; what is that all about? The book didn't have that big an effect on me. Or maybe it did, but in that case many, many other things have too. I seem to be made of clusters of words I've heard, because all words jangle like this, bringing with them choruses of phrases, and titles, songs and dialogue I've read or heard before. I wondered about this as a child. And I wondered – was literally haunted by – the question why, when so many things happen in a day, do we remember one thing and not another? I knew it wasn't that we remembered important things: there were many events I couldn't recall in much detail a week later. But then I'd remember buying a token one day for the subway years before, or a flower I stopped and looked at in someone's window box when I was two.

As I got older and read more about psychology, I recognised that the things I remembered were stand-ins for things I could not bear to acknowledge (Freud, *1. Introductory* 291). Books, which I always remember in very minute detail, were a perfect substitute for experiencing the relentless trauma of my own life. And *A Hero*… is a very traumatic book, with a narrator

whose shell-shocked tone was very similar to my own. I wrote ‘hero’ instead of ‘auto’ and didn’t see it because the *Noracle* is about my nine-year-old, newly-literate self, who loved that book, and replaced, with nothing short of bliss, her own voice with that of the narrator. I repeat the phrase ‘a hero ain’t nothin’ but a sandwich’ when I hear the word hero, in my head, to myself, in the same way that as a child I ran to lock and unlock our front door fifty times, thinking if I did that the house wouldn’t burn down (or some such). As I outgrew my phobias, I became obsessive about meaning, words and writing while maintaining the rhythm of fear through repetition. My fear is repetitive because it requires constant vigilance; I know now this is due to being surrounded by unpredictable people. Repetition has always been one of my favourite literary devices. When Thomas Hardy writes in his poem ‘The Voice’, ‘Woman much missed how you call to me, call to me’ (Poetry Foundation) I am much more responsive than if he had called to her once. Repetition rocks like a cradle. For Kristeva repetition is primal and pre-verbal, cathartic (28). For me it has functioned like a spell to keep bad things away.

Spells rarely work. The fear I have can’t be controlled or held at bay. It is integral, somatic, almost constant. (Well, it was; it is getting better.) As a writer I want to stress to my readers that they are dealing with a different type of author, one not soothing in their authority, and one to whom giving their attention is not a simple matter of relaxing into roles – reader and writer, storyteller and passive listener, informed and uninformed. I want the reader to *help me* somehow. To help by hearing.

My first step, since I wrote my first pieces at fourteen, is to give the reader as much information as possible. But I know you can't spell things out entirely, that you have to use form to both inform and coax them. Which is why all of my creative work has been pretty subversive. I wrote a memoir at the absurd age of 25, a novel from many different points of view in which the main character was an amalgamated projection of the other characters when I was 35, and a fictionalised history of my childhood, at 40. All these literary gestures felt, at the time, like the only thing I was capable of doing. The place the second novel began and ended was Chapter 0, as it happens. My point was that we can't progress in the way that the standard Hero's Journey, of which I'll say more later, would have us believe. I see now this way of thinking was a toxic trap and that we *can* progress, that *I* can progress, into the present moment.

But I need to accept my failings from the get-go. My confusion of the letter O and the number 0 is what I wanted to call attention to, when I wrote the subheading – but that typo was a false one: I planted it. I wanted to throw that 0 in to show how much writing confuses me, even on rudimentary levels. I ended up writing the wrong word entirely. I write words wrong. I spell them wrong. But I don't use them wrong. I check the meanings of even the most banal words before sending a text (banal – so lacking in originality as to be obvious and boring).

I began this section thinking of the word hero and not auto, forgetting what I came to say, so precariously layered was my thinking. The intersection of meaning with intention seems inherently obfuscating; its purpose, after all,

was originally to distance me from unbearably painful experience. The hero on his journey runs alongside the *Noracle*; the hero is the author's (my) foil, their journey to self-knowledge is what I am trying to deconstruct. So maybe that's why I wrote the word hero. The concept of the hero, his (or sometimes, unconvincingly, her) journey, informs every book I've written. I take issue with their stories. I am pulled towards them by inertia and the pressure to conform but pulled away by a sense of the lies they imprint on us as readers. My intention is to question the assumptions we make about causation – the way we credit desire, human desire, with creating the circumstances that push a story (or our lives) forward. But when we begin to look at how we understand our own actions, how we credit them with effects they don't have, we move closer to the unsettling vision set forth in the *Noracle*, which aims to be an embodiment of an ambivalence I have had to embrace: we both create our destinies and don't at all. It is not that neither are true, it is that both are, even as they contradict each other.

Aren't I the hero of the *Noracle*? Hell no! Who am I in it? I am the reader reading my own experience and trying to make sense of it. After several published works in which I reached for the reader and found air, I started reaching back inwards, into my guts, an abject and disgusting place. No one else was going to do it for me.

Trauma

Disassociation in psychology is a state in which the subject becomes emotionally absent in the present in order to make something terrifying bearable. The form my disassociation takes is analytical, repetitive and sometimes superstitious thought. In *Trauma and Recovery* Judith Herman describes chronic trauma survivors' complex disassociation:

> When the victim [of prolonged trauma] has been reduced to a goal of simple survival, psychological constriction becomes an essential adaptation… Through the practice of disassociation, voluntary thought suppression, minimisation, and sometimes outright denial, they learn to alter an unbearable reality. (87)

She goes on to use George Orwell's definition of *doublethink* as an apt description of this state, which she further defines as 'trance-like' (87). Even if my life is devoid of trauma and abuse at present, I still feel, think, read, watch, write and interact much of the time as if I'm in danger. Furthermore, though the abuse has stopped the trauma has lived on in my body, producing mental health issues, and, debatably, cancer.

Living with chronic abuse and a constant sense of fear, I developed a devout commitment to truth and justice; I knew I was being wronged, but I was gifted with nothing like the nerve required to demand justice. That's not true, actually – I learned from experience that demanding it made matters worse. So I just waited, hyper-vigilantly, for the abuse to pass. I could not hate, or hold my parents and family, my caregivers and, later, friends and boyfriends, responsible, so I turned the anger inwards. It was my fault. It

makes me feel incredibly ashamed to name the abuse but it doesn't seem fair to my reader to be so vague. I was physically beaten up, emotionally dismissed and belittled, and sexually abused. I was also – and this is possibly the hardest part, certainly the most insidious – convinced that the only problem was me. In my formative little universe of rights and wrongs, it may be surprising that I never thought that I was good and the others bad. But as Herman explains it:

> When it is impossible to avoid the reality of the abuse, the child must construct some system of meaning that justifies it. Inevitably the child concludes that her innate badness is the cause. The child seizes upon this explanation early and clings to it tenaciously, for it enables her to preserve a sense of meaning, hope and power. If she is bad, then her parents are good… If, somehow, she has brought this fate upon herself, then somehow she has the power to change it. If she has driven her parents to mistreat her, then, if only she tries hard enough, she may someday earn their forgiveness and finally win the protection and care she so desperately needs. (103)

Interestingly, I didn't exactly think I was bad either. I adopted a pretty fair view: we all had good and bad within us (which, unfortunately, is what is true). This irony plagues me – I was treated very unfairly, but as a child I happened upon, or was possibly blessed with, the explanation that the cruelty inflicted on me was a product of the perpetrator's pain. I empathised my way out of anger and towards a strict self-denial. My pain meant nothing. I could handle

it. After all, if I didn't handle it, I'd hurt someone the way people were hurting me. That seemed a reasonable assumption given that I put my torturers' anger down to not knowing themselves and therefore not knowing how to control themselves. In this way I was actually blaming myself, because I was not allowing myself to feel anger – but it was complex and clever, and it has taken me years to see that by diminishing my own experience I am, in fact, still blaming myself. You can also see why it has remained so important for me to study myself: I saw the unstudied psyche, rife with murky motivations, as the enemy. I thought that if the people around me truly understood themselves I would be safe.

Until only recently I ignored my own pain, so much so that when I was anaemic for years I told myself I was just getting old (at forty-four); when I had terrifying waking visions of spirits, old Jewish men who looked like my dying father, staring me down in my tenement stair, I told myself I was afraid of something else, something not real. I shook with fear of omens when a bird flew into my shut window – *why, and what can it mean?* But, being the rational person I am (or wanted to be), I put it down to my psychology. I am always afraid, I told myself, and this was nothing new: it's the tracks laid by my trauma. Also, I was writing novels at that time, and I divined that novels (to quote my dad!) 'presuppose a conspiracy theory of life'… as a novelist I have to set up the order and meaning of the book, and when I get into that mind-set I start to see the world around me as having meaning the way a novel does. Life begins to have the lovely and terrifying gothic Flannery O'Connor-esque curves of foreshadowing and symbolism.

My point is that I dismissed my prophetic visions, believing that way madness lies. And should I have believed them? Yes and no. I should have taken them seriously and asked what I was trying to tell myself. Because of the bad habit of dismissing my own needs, I almost died.

Those who disassociate have their own way with it, just as we have our own way with language. My brand of discursive disassociation was complex, streamlined and thus harder to see as the sinister force that it was. Mine was to think, to rationalise. I used the pursuit of meaning to avoid the embodied experience of what was happening. I'd watch people, observe with unending exactitude what happened to them; if they were happy or sad, or drunk or high, or if it was their birthday and they hated birthdays, and so on. I figured if I was ever-vigilant, I would be safer and more prepared for whatever came my way. Of course, it didn't actually work; it doesn't work, because abuse has nothing to do with the abused. At any rate, in my disassociation I was always able to pinpoint some flaw in me – my observation or behaviour – that caused the wrong thing to happen, that caused my tormentor to get angry or horny. This is one way in which I began to struggle with delusions of omnipotence, ironically: I was profoundly powerless in the real world. I blamed myself for the hatred heaped on me, and sought to change myself. I began to think I caused everything. I was becoming a writer, for what do we do when we write stories, but dole out fate?

The Abject

My initial attraction to the Kristevan abject (it is her *discovery*: in psychoanalysis, stages in development are *discovered*, like fossils and mathematical truths) appeared at a time when my unknown cancer was growing. Kristeva's descriptions of the putrescence of the abject resonated strongly:

> The *symptom*: a language that gives up, a structure within the body, a non-assimilable alien, a monster, a tumour, a cancer that the listening devices of the unconscious do not hear, for its strayed subject is huddled outside the paths of desire. (11)

I imagined strange gaping wounds on my body, full of black pearls, worms growing out of my thigh, lumps of lymph protruding from my neck. At that time, when I was beginning this PhD and before I took my year-long leave of absence, my knowledge of the Kristevan abject focused on the disgust involved at viewing the product of my pen. Other writers I've known have acknowledged this feeling, a genuine disgust with their own art, and visual art has done a booming trade in shit (which is probably second only to the corpse in terms of commonplace abject objects). As Donald Kuspit blogs in 'The Triumph of Shit' (artnet), 'To paint is to stick the extra finger of the physical paintbrush up one's psychic anus, forcing one's body ego to excrete a painting' (2001). Ahem. But it follows that for a time I explained my revulsion

at myself and my work as par for the course. As an artist, and all that psychologically entails, it made sense to feel so rotten.

That said, upon the publication of my first novel *Miss Thing* in 2010, although I saw the difficulty in my given task of telling a story that honours all points of view, uplifting the villain and questioning the sanctity of the protagonist, I felt there was reason to be hopeful (artistically, if not commercially). Since my early teens, my favourite novelist has been Dostoevsky, and I'd noticed that he managed to make the reader understand all his characters, to feel like all of them, not just – and sometimes more so, than – the protagonist. I now know this was due to his use of what the Russian formalist critic Bakhtin called dialogism (39), or polyphony, and what Kristeva renamed intertextuality (Alfaro 268). It's not a coincidence that Kristeva, mother of the abject, lodestar of my last two anti-narrative works, introduced Bakhtin to a wider audience in 1966 (Lesic-Thomas 1). My talent for seeing all sides of a story slipped in nicely beside my personalised mode of disassociating from childhood trauma: as an adept empathiser with my tormentors and abusers, I thought I might have a career as a novelist.

But becoming a writer in this polyphonic way almost killed me, and won me few fans. Why did it work for Dostoevsky and not me (putting aside the fact that he is the best writer ever)? I blame God. Dostoevsky was devoutly Christian and I was the opposite. In my faith space, there was a big void that I wasn't trying to hide. Since the mid 20th century most novelists have side-lined God and used the Hero's Journey itself as the reward. The contemporary novel rewards the discovery of the self, a debatably Freudian

invention, but at least the reader is given an ordering of events they know and have heard a million times before – a place they can slot their dreams. What I was attempting had no reward for the reader. I was trying to show that the story was a con while writing the story. The true pain for me was that I had believed in the novel so wholeheartedly that when I finally rejected it I was very bitter. The one place where I had placed hope had let me down.

What drew me so closely to the novel in the first place was the possibility of alignment between feeling and thought, the meeting of reason and feeling, which Bakhtin points out, is where Dostoevsky's genius lies (39). What I loved so much about Dostoevsky's novels was precisely that he guides the reader into the heart *and mind* of each character, even those that oppose the hero. In a sense the characters become the author (39).

So it was with what Jung might term synchronicity (Wilhelm xxiv), a concept I made fun of in *Miss Thing*, that I was a besotted novel reader and pot smoking pre-teen in the '80s when Kristeva's abject took flight. I was at the beginning of what Jung terms 'individuation', the bringing of the self from an unconscious to a conscious state (264), when the feminist psychoanalytic theory that best defines me was unearthed. Kristeva said that just as one can be stuck on an anal, oral, or narcissistic stage, one can be stuck in the realm of abjection. This ties into my self-hatred that resulted from abuse: 'The language of the self becomes a language of abomination' (105). And yet it was a language somehow of freedom, radicalism and rebellion: '…the abject is edged with sublime. It is not the same moment on the journey, but the same subject and speech bring them into being' (11).

The abject is associated with horror, horrible acts, death, the animal, viscera, fluid, and the maternal. According to Kristeva, the maternal is that which must be rejected as we peel ourselves away from our mothers; we must be disgusted by the link in order to embrace the father, the law, the phallic. The mother represents all the things we have to hate and undervalue in women in order to exist in patriarchy. She is the feminine, the edgeless, the leaking, the irrational, the non-verbal. But she is also inseparable from literature, the sublime, the interdependent and artistic. Kristeva writes that Dostoyevsky himself 'X-rayed sexual, moral, and religious abjection, displaying it as a collapse of paternal laws… and by symbolising the abject, through a masterful delivery of the jouissance produced by uttering it, Dostoyevsky delivered himself of that ruthless maternal burden' (20). Of course I wanted to be a writer. I wanted to write through the pain, be heard and be released. As a feminist I also saw my calling as political: my childhood had been wretched in a way only a girl's could.

Abjection is politically significant because it is a microcosm of how patriarchy works – abjectville is the place where the child rejects the mother as visceral and filthy, and moves to the rational, the paternal, and crucially, the verbal. It makes sense on one level that I would identify with it: the adults around me could often literally not speak, or their speech made no sense due to the drugs they were on. It also makes sense that, given that, I would fervently want to believe in the stories in books – and yet I didn't. Well, I did and I didn't. Even as I looked to stories, painstakingly, for answers, I felt abjection because I enjoyed the stories, the comeuppance, the resolution,

the catharsis, but I also knew it was all a sham, a drug, a delusion. I knew from the age of thirteen that I would join the ranks of those working with the shit of the abject to try and escape it. Of course, this is all very ambivalent. Is the abject sublime or disgusting? Is writing wallowing in shit or growing out of it like a lotus?

Kristeva writes that the ambiguity of abjection (7) is that there is no way out because there is no desire, per se – there is no desire to get out because the way out is the same as the way in, and above all the subject is afraid. She writes that for the abjected, the subject who she calls ‘the deject’, there is no object of love or hate; there is only fear instead of desire. This connection between abjection and fear and the juxtaposition of desire and fear makes sense in my experience. The Hero’s Journey is one of desire; fiction and scriptwriting manuals invariably dictate we must know what the character wants in each scene. This has always bugged me, probably because all I grew up desiring was a lack of torment. My characters sometimes think they know what they want, but they never really do. That’s my job. My omniscience, my knowing what others don’t, grew out of my hypervigilance as we have seen.

My daily fears – of being hit, yelled at, sexually abused, left hungry, exiled from the group if I spoke up – I told myself I could handle. It was the irrational fears I fixated on, and still do. The fears of a child. For years, the stories I watched and read offered solace, because usually truth and beauty, bravery and goodness, won out. But I could not fully accept them because ‘I knew it was a lie’. This was the ambiguity of abjection borne out.

All my phobias were ‘public’; I told people about them and they had to engage with them, watching me refuse the elevator, and knowing I was taking the eleven flights up and down to my apartment alone several times a day while they rode in it, or observing my terror and hyperventilation on school trips on the subway. In contrast, the tortures of my daily life I never spoke about; I was too terrified. Kristeva describes phobias as the province of the abject soul. She makes a distinction between a deject and other earlier Freudian types: hysterics and neurotics. She writes that the deject is not repressed, not in denial: ‘Since they make the conscious/unconscious distinction irrelevant, borderline subjects and their speech constitute propitious ground for a sublimating discourse (‘aesthetic’ or ‘mystical’ etc.) rather than a scientific or rationalist one’ (7).

I am nearing what made me love the oracular and write like an oracle; it’s there on the horizon. When I started writing I wanted to tell the usual story at the same time as trying to prove it wrong. That didn’t work. After my second novel flopped I started to feel like I had no words left to try and tell the truth. Then I started writing a blog, to keep the sense of the utter pointlessness of my existence at bay, called Madame Bildungsroman’s Optimistic Worldview (later published as an eponymous book of fragments) and through it I began to inhabit a character, a mortal but non-human entity, who delivered maxims and who put on airs. I felt more at home with her, in her strangeness, and indeed her abjection — she’s a *papier-mâché* effigy whose spoken words appear and disappear in magic marker on her paper skin, and she dies. The oracle is able to make her unconscious conscious, and with Madame B I was

exposing the murky revelations of a dying, wounded prophet (or someone in the grip of delusion, but really, what is the difference between those two things except public opinion?) My affair with literary fiction was over.

All the years I was writing I was of course consulting the *I Ching*. It did its best to train me in the Taoist values of modesty and acceptance. In the Madame B years I might add that it didn't do me much good as I was convinced I should endure abuse as a form of going with the flow, of modesty even. Still, even though I read the *I Ching* wrong on many things for many years, I have stood by it. I read its hexagrams differently now. No matter what individual hexagrams say, the overriding, underlying, imbued meaning is always: everything changes, sometimes predictably and sometimes out of the blue, sometimes in ways that make sense and other times in ways that defy reason. In fact, what I've come to see is that non-duality (good is bad and bad is good etc.) is not just an ideology to be upheld or debated, it is reality. Unconsciously, Freud, without whom none of this would have been written, knew that, and knowing that he brought ambivalence into psychoanalytic discourse.

Freud as a Repressed Novelist

Hexagram sixteen, ‘Pushing Upward’, I call ‘Bad Faith’. The title references Sartre who I thought was very cool when I was sixteen, and it’s about realizing I didn’t have to do what I was supposed to, and leaving a good high school for a mediocre one. As I moved into my teens, I read constantly. Having been given a note by my first psychiatrist that said competition was bad for me, I read all through PE. I can remember the sound of soccer balls on linoleum in a low-ceiling gym as the first time I experienced the repressed interactions of Mr Darcy and Elizabeth. Novels. Austen, Hardy, Melville, Stendhal, Forster, Wharton… you get the style I was into. The traditional novel of manners, morals and fate. But I think my favourite novelist of all in those early days was Freud. I remember being so affected by his case study *Dora* and the way the truth came to light. It just seemed believable. Freud’s case studies read like detective stories. He writes a ripping yarn. Jung, on the other hand, who many of my friends were reading in high school while smoking lots of pot – his dry style bored me to tears.

After reading *Dora* I had a dream I can still remember. I was walking around the mediocre school, somehow fittingly called the High School for the Humanities, past the grates in the stairwell, and all the boys were walking around naked from the waist down with hard-ons (which I had seen plenty of as a kid). I was trying to get away. Then I was in a shop that sold only table lamps and pocketbooks. I was looking for a pocketbook. I was surprised and a little disappointed at how transparent my unconscious was when I woke up.

But I persisted with Freud because he'd won my faith: he assured us that it wasn't the dream itself that mattered but how we choose to describe it, our associations with what we dreamed (*An Outline* 52), specifically the words we select. At that time I still had faith in words.

My relationship to them has always struck me as almost synaesthetic, and certainly visceral. I can describe things much more easily with metaphors than in any other way; I often see or think something, and can't verbalise it descriptively, but can give you a metaphor instantly. Hexagram two addresses how I felt about words on the page before I could read them. I continue to wonder why I developed the relationship with words that I have, and psychoanalysis has offered many tempting explanations. In Freud's work, great import is placed on what happens before a child can speak. One can get stuck in any of his early stages due to repressed desires and this can manifest as neurosis. Growing up, my way of thinking was consistently referred to as neurotic (including by me). Neurosis would entail that I had attached my mind to something that was standing in for a desire I couldn't bear to admit to myself. I am much more convinced now, as I have said, by an argument that focuses on trauma and disassociation for an explanation of why I think the way I do. The theory of neurosis requires the neurotic to not understand themselves, and when Freud guides them, using therapeutic transference, into the light of their true motivations, they end up pretty much cured. Therapy hasn't helped me in that way. I know what happened and why I did what I did and have been who I am; what I can't seem to fix is my broken nervous system. My mind and body exhibit symptoms of trauma no matter

how much I understand about them. Freud's theories certainly have something of the victim-blamer about them, at the same time that they offer the balm that 'everyday unhappiness' (Breuer and Freud 232) is obtainable once the deeper issues come to light. And feminist psychoanalysts have been keen to update Freud's theories about women, as they are pretty disheartening. The most glaring example being Freud changing his tune about the hysterics he saw in his early career, almost all of whom claimed to have been molested as children (I refer to this in hexagram twelve, 'Standstill', or my version, 'Fucking Elevators'). Initially, like a decent person would, Freud believed the patients, but under pressure from other psychologists he changed his tack and came up with the idea that these were fantasies too unpalatable for the women to take responsibility for (Masson xxxi). They were 'hysterics', they were 'neurotics', they were not telling the truth. In a way the unconscious was invented to hide child sexual abuse, or if not invented, utilised to do so.

Throughout my life I have read Freud as a scavenger might, searching for any little scraps that would validate my experience. Reading for me has always been as much between myself and the author as it is between myself and the story, and Freud was refreshingly blatant about what he believed. I felt excluded from the coherence of other writers who believed in systems I thought were absurd – Dostoevsky had Jesus, Hardy had Humanism, Austen had class. Although I loved the surety of their visions and the literary heft they provided, I could see no way into this aspect of their talents; their beliefs were utterly closed to someone raised with the 'values' I had been. It didn't occur

to me until I was in my forties that I might become a psychotherapist, that psychological insight itself might be my form of faith. I was too much of a deject to imagine myself as anything other than a totally fucked-up writer.

The writer I felt I might resemble most closely was Jean Rhys, and that was despite the fact that stylistically we are very different (she's better – she doesn't bang on and on and obfuscate; she's clear as a bell). I try to capture in hexagram forty-three, 'Breakthrough', or my version, 'Jean Rhys', the moment when I felt most like her characters, and also the crucial moment when I took off the mask of the love-interest. Jean Rhys is basically a historical materialist: her take is that without money, romantic love dons a hideous form, and in my experience, that's been borne out. I had no money and couldn't figure out where to fit my deformed self in the world – I was no Jaqueline Rose! – plus I was completely obsessed with finding love. It was such a waste of energy, and indeed love, but I'd say it was inevitable, given who was around me and what I had been through, and, indeed, what I'd been reading for years.

The Deject Rejects Beautiful Literary Forms

When I began to write excessively, at fourteen, I was immediately disheartened by the effect my words had on my reader. I got blank stares, which is not what I was going for. I desperately wanted them to feel what I felt. There is a scene in *G/M* where Carrie Martian (the autofictionalised me) explains a dream she has, she thinks eloquently, and once she finishes, she blames her own poor storytelling/delivery for a shift of mood in the room for the worse (32). My words never seemed to produce the right response. Erroneously, I thought what was required was more accuracy, and I have tried to perfect it to the point where I am even less comprehensible than I was before I could speak; accuracy is not what a reader comes to literature for. Unfortunately, I was trapped.

To pick from the drop-down menu I saw in most books wasn't an option because they weren't true to my experience. Resolution, character reliability, even the pursuit of goals, seemed to be an artifice, and connected to the false beauty of the form that both transfixed and angered me. Even when I was a committed reader of beautiful forms I would stop and wonder, when did the characters do boring things? What were their self-sabotaging self-conscious preoccupations? What did their author think of them, really? Of course I'm only human and I liked to ride the tide of the story and see the good guys and bad guys, but I was always wondering about the humans in there too, humans the author seemed to repress. Sometimes I even felt like I knew the characters better than the author did. And while I might have

interpreted this as a fault of the author's verisimilitude, I didn't – I blamed form. Form, and its relentless roll towards the end, the climax, by its very nature repressed truth. I would have liked to spend a long day just running errands with the characters I loved instead of always reading about their high dramas and resolutions.

The form of the traditional novel demands the beginning, middle and end. Digressions needs to be reined in or offered in service to the forward roll of pace and conclusion to keep the reader engaged. All kinds of tricks can be used to produce this effect, and to hide that that is what is happening. My objection to stories, as I've mentioned, started early. As I got older and read more deeply I realised that it wasn't exactly the characters and plots that were unbelievable, too perfect, but the shape of the story itself that caused the disconnect from truth, that struck me as false to the point of misinformation. As Ploeg says, describing Jabès take on the inherent problem of writing, '… — we only see the residue of the attempts to establish meaning, but never meaning itself' (97).

Why did I confuse and conflate truth and fiction? Because we all do. My daughter told me the other day that she was sure that what we imagine is as real as what we see. And I think I agree: our creations are real. Novels and traditional stories use the raw material of lived experience to posit a shape that is pleasing, a life that is a flower – symmetrical, purposeful – and that's what art has traditionally done. What I have objected to throughout my career is the idea that this is good, or neutral, or even that there is no harm in this.

The traditional story is one of the most restrictive art forms on offer, and it's the most widely consumed.

From a personal, developmental angle, it makes sense that I fell into a dislike of beauty. I had had the idea of my (alleged) own beauty rammed down my throat from a very young age, as hexagram twenty, 'Contemplation', or my version, 'Being Seen', illustrates. As a child I was consistently singled out for being 'beautiful' – I stood out. Both my parents and brother had dark hair and eyes and I was blonde and blue-eyed (which was not common in my public school or in my neighbourhood in NYC). I hated attention being called to my appearance and it was indeed dangerous (admittedly, among other more ambivalent things) to look like me; it attracted attention from many unsavoury characters, both known and unknown. I wasn't seen, in part, because I was looked at too much. It pissed me off even more because I was never allowed to even mention this; there is not much people hate more than a pretty girl complaining about being pretty. I think it may be as uncomfortable as a book referring to itself.

I was drawn to feminist writers who were compelled to grapple with the slippery conundrum: how can we challenge notions of formal beauty in art while still making beautiful art? How can form be a thing in itself, separate from the mess of life, and yet reflect the frustrations (and indeed repetitiveness and boredom) of the pursuit of formal seamlessness? Lydia Davis, Alice Notley and Louise Glück, were among the writers in whose company I hoped to someday be placed as I began the long game of writing without telling the same old story it was imperative to avoid. The only way

was to perpetually challenge, to upend expectations; for me it came at the expense of being easily grasped.

Because I did not and do not want to shape things into a shape that you immediately like or want to see more of, that you feel safe and comfortable with, that you assume trades in meanings you share. This is a political stance as well as a personal one. The two strands, my looks and discursive disassociation, came together to make me content-obsessed and anti-form. *Miss Thing* was a shredded novel, told in only written artefacts and from many points of view. *G/M* didn't progress; it was anti-progression. *Madame Bildungsroman's Optimistic Worldview* was a fragmented, shattered book of aphorisms and flash fiction, and my last work, an anti-epic epic poem, *The Minnow Would be Lost,* was about the trap of traditional stories and death (among other things). The evolution of my published work spiralled down and away from normal story structure. Being so anti-surface and anti-form has probably had a lot to do with my lack of success. Even after I have polished and polished and my work looks fairly normal, the reader sees the ghost of the hideous mess that it was. In the case of the *Noracle*, I tried something different and made its shape abnormal but formally demanding – I had to learn how to typeset a little, which was interesting because after my father burned his dissertation (see hexagram two) he became a typesetter – and typefaces and spacing were very important to him, he never shut up about them.

I thought of him as I committed to writing the text of the *Noracle's* hexagrams and set them in the shapes of the lines. The reader is instructed

to read from the bottom of the page to the top (following the shape of the lines that the concrete prose poems take), and thus needs to navigate blocks of prose, broken lines, negative space. I don't make it easy for the reader (I've never wanted to and probably never will), but the difference between this and my previous work is this time I followed a template. I didn't just try and push form aside, I thrust it in all its weirdness towards the reader as an open admission of what a pain in the ass I am. I want the reader to have to work hard. I want them to have to be hypervigilant as they read. I want them to feel what I feel.

Cancer

The bird that flew into my window and the ghost I saw in the hall were cancer. My fear had finally taken shape in my body and I was showing it to myself in the world. I had grown increasingly superstitious and consulted the *I Ching* more and more. I felt something was off and relied on signs, not reason. Ironically my GP, the most reasonable of people, could have told me something was off, if only my conviction that it was all in my head had not allowed me to convince them that I didn't even need a full blood count. I had been severely anaemic for at least three years before I was diagnosed. They couldn't believe I was getting up, much less walking and doing yoga when it was discovered. Again, one of my coping mechanisms as a child, one I was strenuously encouraged in, was to just 'get on with it' as they say in this

country. I was allowed to be in psychological pain, and in fact my mother seemed to take something close to pleasure in my mental pain, observing that it was a sign of intelligence, but she was convinced — and I had to uphold the party line — that I was in peak physical condition. I smoked two packs of cigarettes a day and drank to black-out twice or more a week from the age of sixteen to twenty-five, and still I had to say I felt fine, great even. And of course I always looked very well indeed. Hangovers reddened my face and made me look like I'd just come off a ski slope.

This cancer had advanced quite far, though the GP had dismissed me as the hysterical I told him I was, and my partner (now ex) had dismissed my tiredness as Jewish whinging. Still, I had never quite believed them. I knew what was true but did not know how to say it, was afraid to say it; not because I was afraid I was ill but because I didn't want to make trouble, to be an inconvenient person, to not be liked, which is as absurd and sad as it sounds. I remember once passing the blood donation centre and admitting to myself that I didn't want to give blood (though I am usually a giving person, have volunteered extensively and have a rare blood type) because I was 'afraid they would find something'. I knew…

How did I know? I have always looked at myself in the mirror 'too much'. My mother didn't have a lot to say to me except that I was a great beauty, and I had all that shit projected on me. I would look at myself and think: this is what is considered pretty? I didn't get it at all. This never changed. I may not know what beauty is because of it. Almost everything can look beautiful or ugly to me. My point is that when I had cancer I would look at myself, as I

always had, and think: this is odd, this is not how I expected to age. I was puffy from anaemia, but no one else agreed I looked ‘off’. I asked my loved ones and they all said I was mad, and vain. Looking back at photos I can see how pale I was. And I was puffy.

When I was diagnosed, I had already started writing the *Noracle* for the PhD, and it was a good thing because I finally had enough money from my funding to begin the process of true self-care: I was able to leave my partner. And, after years of telling myself I was paranoid, those feelings – that I was dying, that something awful was happening – were something I used my last shreds of energy to pursue. I went to a young female locum GP (see hexagram sixty-two, ‘The Preponderance of the Small’ or my title, ‘the Locum’) and it turned out … I was dying. It actually made me laugh. Kristeva writes that the abject ‘is not without laughter’ (8).

Why was it funny? Because I had never had anything to have faith in except my lack of faith. And now my faith was confirmed. I was the doomed person I always knew I was.

After surgery and chemotherapy, which required a year-long medical leave during which the university continued to pay me my funding in error (thank god because otherwise I would not have survived), I found myself back staring at where I had been creatively and knowing that I simply had to find a way to suffer less. The *Noracle* is about suffering, and I had suffered as I wrote it. Not so much because I was reliving my childhood (I am used to that; I am haunted) but because putting it into words always feels wrong. I associate writing about my past with not being responded to and that brings

me back to a place of self-blame; and when I am there, abject and powerless, I am self-destructive, suicidal even.

I knew I couldn't forfeit all I had written, so how could I change it into something that might be more affirming? Of course it already had lightness and levity, all my work does – it's its saving grace – but what it lacked was exactly what the bullshit Hero's Journey provides: hope. The hero learns to have hope through their travails. They are tested and tried and… truth prevails. How was that going to fit into this story?

And it isn't just the specific challenges, those points on the journey that Joseph Campbell elucidates in *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (Masterclass): refusal of the call, supernatural aid… it is also the form of the journey itself. We know the shape of a story and we expect it when we embark on one. We are deeply troubled when life doesn't follow its shape, and we try to cut and tear it to fit the story's Procrustean bed. Our wants and fears, our attachments, all have their places in the story and if they fit wrong, we feel justified in fighting to accommodate them neatly. It's part of an endless cycle of suffering.

I'd already dabbled in Buddhism and have done yoga for twenty-five years, not shallowly, but paying attention to its spiritual traditions, its reliance on love, goodness, awareness; I was even pretty well versed in the chakra system when I learned I had cancer. I felt a little more was needed. I began reading about and chanting to White Tara, having read she was good for longevity. I officially took refuge and was given my Buddhist name, Karma Rangrik Lhamo, which means Goddess of Self-Awareness. Buddhism

teaches turning away from duality, more so than the *I Ching*, and more so than yoga, because there isn't any 'bad' in Buddhism. It's all connected. One day something seems bad and the next it seems good, or maybe in the next life it will seem good. When one takes this on board it can cause a radical revisioning of life. This is what I needed when I was being treated for cancer and full of self-blame. I needed to hear that it was not my fault, it was karma.

One of the *Noracle*'s major themes is to call into question dualism and the part conceptual awareness plays in creating views that induce suffering, for ourselves and others. In some sense the *Noracle* is an act of Jung's individuation: I am turning away from the *I Ching* as one does a parent, calling into question its values, how it sets at opposite poles male and female, good and bad, earth and sky. One goes to an oracle because one wants something, even if that is reassurance, so of course the *I Ching* would not be doing its job if it didn't tell you that you will or won't get what you want (or don't want what you want, or ask if you really want what you think you want, etc.) I realised, upon my return to the *Noracle*, what I wanted to write post-cancer was something that wasn't about desire or whether or not people get what they want in fair or unfair ways. I wanted to address the way of seeing that makes us categorise things as good and bad, and the deception at the heart of that way of thinking.

As I have moved further and further away from the novel, I have moved closer to accepting my intuition, my non-rational voice, she who always felt, in some ways, forced to speak. Prior to cancer, for as long as I can remember, I wanted to sleep. I didn't. I remained someone who did their

work, took care of people, kept up appearances. Life depleted me immensely. During this period, I searched for why everything seemed so ass-backwards, futile, misguided. People who knew me knew this. At one point, a few years before my diagnosis, my dead father's ex-girlfriend, immortalised as Reb Cantor in the *Noracle*, sent me a book that that was to become a friend throughout my illness.

The Queen of Poetry and *Reality*

Reality by Peter Kingsley arrived in the post, with its suspect large print and pedantic declarative sentences, in 2015. It wasn't so much that I trusted the illustrious Barbara Barg (Reb Cantor in the *Noracle*), self-titled 'Queen of Poetry' and founding and only member of 'Jews for a Permanent Diaspora', who sent it, but that, in haste and desperation, I was still reading everything by anyone who claimed they could be of help for my intense anxiety and mental pain.

I suppose in a way Barg (as she was known) did verse me in the art of exhaustive Jewish questioning, alongside my dad, and the other Jews I grew up with. Thinkers. Drug takers. Poets. Allen Ginsberg was never more than one degree of separation away. My dad claimed he was an angel. I remember one morning he came in with papers all dewy mouthed and said he had passed Allen who was eating in the window of a coffee shop and 'just

to see him was to have your day light up'. Ginsberg was a Buddhist Jew too, like me.

My relationship to Barg wasn't great. Probably because she was my father's girlfriend throughout my formative years (See hexagrams four, twenty-three, twenty-seven, thirty-four, fifty-two, and fifty-six) and I never liked her that much (probably because she was my father's girlfriend). My father never once hugged me, or told me he loved me or anything like that, but he was forever cocooned in his greatcoat with her. He was always in a Gogol greatcoat. It dragged along the streets of Chelsea and the garment district in the winter and served as his bed in the summer.

In a house full of books, in Edinburgh, in 2015, unable to publish my second novel, which I wrote, in no small part, because editors said *Miss Thing* was too uptown, not gritty enough — and I thought, 'I'll show them!' — I read *Reality*, and tried to figure out how I was not going to die, while at the same time, deep down, wanting very much to die. I had tried the only thing that mattered to me, writing, and I had failed. *Reality* changed me, readied me for cancer in some ways. As I read it I felt like I was being rowed out on the Styx. Things were falling into place. I gave up writing almost altogether and started painting. In my paintings of everyday scenes – my kitchen, the tenement garden – I always included a giant blue Pilates ball, and I hate Pilates, I only do yoga. The intrusive ball was the cancer I didn't know I had. I also wrote a disturbing little illustrated children's book about a woman who swallowed a 'dodgy dumpling' that grew and grew and then was born, as an artistic child.

So I was pretty far gone when I read Barg's gift, *Reality*, which looks at the ancient Greek 'father of logic' Parmenides. My father was a professor of logic before he became a junkie, and that is partly why Barg sent it, because I am the philosopher's daughter (incidentally, much to my near-horror, my daughter has just finished her degree in philosophy). The author, an academic teetering on the brink of megalomaniacal zealotry, Peter Kingsley, claims that what Parmenides discovered was not logic but rather that truth is not discursive, that just because something can be proven doesn't mean it's true, and vice versa.

Kingsley argues that Parmenides was an initiate of Iatromantis, which was basically an ancient Greek shamanistic cult. He supports his claims with archaeological evidence of Iatromantis cults in Parmenides' hometown of Velia in Southern Italy and puts forward the thesis that traditional classicists' readings of Parmenides are a massive misreading. Parmenides' ostensible instruction in logic is actually anti-instruction, 'The principle, well known to ancient Gnostics in particular is the mystery of inversion. The idea behind it is that truth must never be stated directly but always through its opposite' (417). So although Parmenides appears to give us instructions in logic he is actually telling us that logic is a trick, and will lead us away from truth. I loved this as it tied into my idea that the standard's story's structure, with its endings, and closure, were the opposite of true. I think it goes without saying that Hero's Journey stories unfold logically. Freud's case studies certainly do.

Kingsley adamantly insists Parmenides' teachings are literally a message from the underworld; he did, in fact, trip out at the feet of goddesses, taking

the words he wrote directly from their mouths, and his contemporaries knew this. For Kingsley, it is crucial that we take what Parmenides himself appears to have believed very seriously. Because if he was an initiate in the healing cult of Oulios, what light does that cast on the origins of rationalism and logic and indeed on rationalism and logic themselves?

The introductory section of the surviving fragments of ‘On Nature’ is a proem in which sun goddesses, guardians between Night and Day, gatekeepers of the underworld, explain to Parmenides that he must find stillness and an acceptance of all that is: ‘Every thought is its own validation. It needs no confirmation. Whatever we are able to think is true’ (73). Kingsley tells us that this statement has troubled scholars, and it has: Parmenides’ entry in the *Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy* is concerned with how philosophers from Aristotle to Bertrand Russell have struggled to read Parmenides’ work, which is full of contradictions, often within the same sentence. Parmenides confounds the rational mind he defined.

Parmenides was an expert in *metis*, a heavily nuanced word that can be translated as skill or craft, as well as navigation. It can apply to trickery and is associated with Odysseus for his ability to foil his enemies with guile (Center for Hellenic Studies, Harvard University). Reason is just deception, according to Parmenides’ goddess guides:

> and from this point on
> learn the opinions of mortals by listening to the
> deceptive ordering of my words (206)

The goddesses' riddles concern language, and specifically using language to convince with logic. Humans think they can define reality, but Parmenides says that we lack *metis* or alertness*,* awareness. He tells us that there is deception at the heart of reality (211). The sun goddesses are Persephone and Aphrodite (217). Persephone, who guards the gates to the underworld, and Aphrodite, who is responsible for appearances. Persephone who is death and Aphrodite who is life. The unseen and the seen:

> And also: there is no dividing it
> because it is all alike. There is nothing more here
> that could stop it from holding together with itself
> or less here …
> And what's more: motionless
> in the bonds of great fetters is has no beginning or end
> because creation and destruction have wandered far far away.
> And True and persuasive evidence is what has driven them out. (171)

When Parmenides refers to the 'driving out of creation and destruction', Kingsley tells us he is using the language linked to laws that allowed children to be exiled from their parents' lands (177). Parmenides, who has been identified as a 'lawgiver' by trade by John Burnett (Boas 230), is saying you can use well-chosen words to prove anything, even things that are false. His use of legal language can be traced to the way in which cases were argued in ancient Greece by Athenian orators. Michael Gagarin draws our attention to the storytelling aspect of Athenian law and describes the 'rhetorical and

performative features as evidence for the view that Athenian trials are essentially rhetorical struggles… and are generally unconcerned with the strict applicability of the law to the relevant facts' (3).

Gagarin points out that storytelling is vital to a winning argument (4). He writes, 'The trial lawyer's job (or in Athens the logographer's job) is to tell the story he wants the jury to believe and tell it as effectively as possible' (6). He elaborates that as a lawyer, '…your story must fit the facts, but other stories may also fit the facts' (Gagarin 4). It is my suspicion that in this context of skilled rhetoric the story as we know it in the West flourished and took flight. Theokritos Kouremenos has argued that Aeschylus, author of *The Oresteia*, was influenced by Parmenides as a rhetorician (263).

The Oresteia is a highly charged, harrowing and dramatically deft saga: a trilogy of filicide, revenge and matricide, with a final instalment that is the first courtroom drama: *The Eumenides*. Using the high drama to 'hook' or engage the viewer, the audience is schooled in what's what, which, in *The Oresteia*, is the very clear patriarchal message that killing your daughter is OK. However, for a woman to avenge the murder of her daughter by killing the husband who murdered her is not OK, but for a son to return to kill his mother for killing his father is acceptable. The court decides that neither of the murdered females can be avenged. *The Eumenides* is typically read as a play about reason supplanting old-school, matriarchal Goddess cult 'blood for blood' vengeance as represented by the three female Furies or Erinyes, who were depicted as irrational servants of Persephone in the underworld. (Theoi Project). They have been identified as a late manifestation, made ugly

and irrational, of the mother goddesses traditionally worshipped in Greece – and everywhere else – who were being supplanted by the Apollonian Gods (Foster 147).

Is it farfetched, then, to imagine that *The Oresteia* was a deft public service announcement for the newly-founded patriarchy and the attendant displacement of the old mother goddess Furies? A story with a returning hero, seeking justice, using reason: Greek tragedy (and before it folklore, myth and religious stories) form the model for the Hero's Journey. And we still use the same story structure, religiously. All the talk of re-storying for empowerment, the endless championing of owning our truth and rewriting the narrative, fails to appreciate that the story itself has contours and themes that uphold individualism, self-interest and patriarchy. This is very hard to say without being shouted down for glossing things over, but that's exactly my point, and why The Queen of Poetry and I love Kingsley's book: this isn't just about who can argue the point better, it is about how the shape of the stories we invent have the power to shape the world.

After chemotherapy and surgery I emerged like Parmenides from one of his long trances, seeing what for so long had been invisible. They took a 5cm tumour from my ego chakra, where the water is absorbed at the beginning of your colon, they threw it in the bin (as the surgeon put it) and with the watery site of my wound and my wound removed, and with the space that has made inside of me I am ready to stand here and say… a lot less. As Jabès wrote, 'No more logic once we face the unknown…' *(From the Book* 158).

The Warm Glass Eye: the Illogical Oracular

The Pythia was the proper name of the Greek Delphic oracle. In her dissertation, *The Abjection of Pythia*, Aliana Dyann Tackitt writes that the Pythia grew from earth goddess to oracle. She links the decline of Pythia's standing to the rise of Christianity as it supplanted local religions that valued women (Tackitt 2). In *Divination in Human Nature* Peter T. Struck explains that the Greeks believed in intuition, though they used a word meaning divination (8). He cites multiple examples of how Plato refers to knowing without discursive reasoning as being a higher form of knowledge and one only available to the Gods (52) and sometimes poets (72). Plato draws a clear distinction between magicians and sorcerers and those with intuitive powers, seeing the former as chancers and the latter as touched with the divine.

In my anti-epic poem, set in a bombed-out bazaar not far from Greece, the speaker – a shape shifting old man/young woman – explains that they sleep for days and days at every seasonal juncture (*The Minnow* 32). For years I unknowingly inhabited a life that felt downright oracular, intuition heavy, a place close to the reality Kingsley delineates. It's been called depression, this withdrawal, but I'd say it is more an act of preservation amidst the noise created by discursive thinking. All words in discursive space are the wrong words, and unfortunately it is the space I wrote from. It was

where I was slowly dying, bleeding and growing in the wrong ways, unconsciously trying to cure myself.

In *The Wounded Storyteller,* Arthur Frank draws our attention to the use of stories to address illness. He offers three models that can be used to view the turmoil of life-shattering illness: the restitution narrative, the chaos narrative and the quest narrative. His anthropological study of the ways people use stories casts a light on the way in which stories are the last legitimate tool we have in our secular culture to produce meaning. We have boxes to tick: good guy, bad fate, saviour, hero, etc. For Frank, we are thoroughly fixated on the story as a site for meaning above all others, even in matters of life and death. Post cancer, searching for voices from places where there are more intuitive, 'non-logical' options, I found Malidoma Patrice Somé's *Of Water and the Spirit.*

Somé speaks about the worldview of his birth village and writes of its people, the Dagara, '…the world of the Dagara does not discriminate between reality and imagination' (9). He explains how when he showed his elders *Star Trek,* they could not understand that it wasn't real. They have no concept of fiction, and associate fiction with telling lies (9). Somé writes of art as magical:

> …art, because it celebrates the powers of the underworld, where the true nature of the natural order is administered by the gods, becomes the greatest healing tool that a community can have… art is a technology characterised by practicality. Art is the form in which spirits choose to exist with us here in this world. (61)

As an artist, this poses very serious (and thrilling, and liberating) questions about why we make art and what the forms we choose mean. The daunting, somehow uncanny idea that art can be both practical and a place where the spirits choose to be with us feels right to me. Spirits are practical. This statement feels similar to the quote I started this essay with, Jabès assertion that writing is the opposite of imagining (*Margins* 24). These are words that I know are true and yet could never explain. It connects with the idea of writing as a place of profound ambivalence. Somé writes, 'Words entrap meaning, torture it … The speech of silence has profound respect for the integrity of meaning' (272). This is a line that could have easily been lifted from Jabès. In my work I have always been driven by this: the need to speak to the fact that words cannot speak for us.

Trying to work through this contradiction, writing it down, has always been a compulsion; at one point I even used to refer to it as an autoimmune disease, but age has made me less caustic. What I mean is that I need to write. I need to write and I never write what I intend to write. Socrates, as quoted by Struck, takes a less world-weary view of poetic production, but sees it as ineluctable nonetheless, and writes that poets '…did not compose what they did compose by wisdom, but by certain natural disposition and enthusiasm, just like the diviners and the givers of oracles. For these also say fine things, but they know nothing of what they are talking about' (72).

What is the connection between healing, intuition and suppressed voices? Is healing letting the inner voice speak, even whilst not

understanding it? What is the relationship between oracular tone and inner voice? My process, my journey if you will, has led me to these questions. Tackitt notes how hard academics have tried to prove that the Pythia was inhaling intoxicating vapours, that she was high as a kite (20). Why this obsession with something that would (ostensibly) discredit the oracle? Because the idea of a knowing that is non-rational is too threatening.

Struck points out the ways in which intuition has been referred to by leading thinkers of different epochs citing Aquinas, Milton, Carpenter and Jung (31, 33). His aim is, in part, to legitimise the age-old existence of cognitive intuition (31). I would argue that thinkers have never lost sight of 'momentary, nondiscursive… apprehension of things that fall outside our self-conscious control' (33), and that a key question is *why* these ways of thinking have been relegated to the margins. What is so untouchable, unapproachable, icky about the intersection of reason, reality, art and intuition?

When I had cancer and didn't know it, I interviewed a fellow NY Jew, Paul Auster, for the Edinburgh Festival. I had never interviewed anyone before and was incredibly nervous. I walked ten miles the day before (not knowing I was extremely anaemic) and stood staring at Portobello Beach in a state of total and utter despair – '[t]he phobic has no other object than the abject' (6). But I did it.

During the interview I asked Paul something, I can't remember what, and he began to explain about the writer Edmund Jabès. I had not only heard of Jabès, I had read him recently, but Paul said, 'no one has heard of Jabès'.

Apparently, I raised my hand slightly then lowered it (I guess deciding that sharing I had read him wouldn't add anything to the interview). At that time I had only read Jabès' *The Book of Margins*, and came to it as poetry. Its cloud-like, sky-like thoughts and kōan-like statements deeply moved me. Not least because I could always sense Jabès as a Jew, though he rarely referred directly to it. Jews remind me of home. Not that I have one, but I once did. My closest relatives were my father's parents – affluent, intellectual NY Jews.

Having read Paul's entire oeuvre to prepare for the interview, I was intrigued to read more Jabès. I revisited Jabès' work as I wrote the *Noracle* and came to see him as a profoundly oracular writer, and also as a deject. His outlandish, outlier approach to who is reader and who is writer, to voice, to speaker, to inside and outside, resonated deeply with my experience of deep intuition, the sanctity of words and wordlessness, and the page as an arena for an exchange that can right some of the wrongs done by human to human. I heard the voice of the Jewish tradition I was raised in, in which we ask questions to prove our faith, and in which asking questions is a proof of faith.

Jabès Permanent Diaspora

My personal history with the Queen of Poetry aside, Barg was someone who understood Judaism as the worldview that it is, especially for the non-believing Jew. Like Paul Auster, Barg and I were raised by non-believers, but

very much in a culture that carried down traditions of rabbinical questioning. Even with my Jewish wannabe WASP-identifying grandparents we were encouraged to ask, to talk. No blank British chewing with food on laps while watching telly; in my childhood that was considered dumb, and dumb was the enemy. Why? One antisemitic boyfriend lovingly joked that Jews breed for intelligence and I would refute that, but the culture does focus on opinions, thought, content. Love is shown through nagging, which is a form of intense attention, I'd argue.

It's hard for me to write about Jews. I am one but I am also not. My mother is a WASP (White Anglo-Saxon Protestant) and I wasn't Bat Mitzvah-ed. My brother used to yell at me and say I was a JAP (a Jewish American Princess) but I in no way was: they have money and are spoiled by loving parents. My Jewish aunt and uncle and my father's parents were close, but not that close, and I always felt like there was a taint on us, because we were broke and my parents were druggies. My fully Jewish friends had parents and extended families who were much more involved with them. So what was I? Half a Jew I guess. My mother, however, was such an indomitable blank (see hexagram thirty, 'Buddha on the Bounty') that Jews were really the only family I knew. If I have a tradition at all, it's Jewish.

When I was a child, the Holocaust was only thirty years ago. Hexagrams eighteen and twenty-one talk about my father's relation to his Jewishness, in an oblique way, and mine to his, in a less oblique way. It's a good example of one of the many things that are, for me, impossible to write about in a declarative way. His self-contempt, his intense sentimentalism, his

weakness, my filtering and embodiments of things passed down through him, and our legacy of failure, is not something that comes out true when I try to spell it out. Here's a metaphor: a fluted, thick-edged white glass fruit bowl, cheap and tacky yet feeling good in the hand; inside the cold glass, a heap of maggot-infested fruit.

I'd argue that his family, Barg's family (she grew up one of very few Jews in Little Rock Arkansas in the 1950s), Paul Auster's family and all the other American Jews were and are still processing the hate that was directed at them, before, during and after WW2. It is a strange thing to be so widely and deeply reviled. Antisemitism, like sexism, can also infect us internally, and I think some of my abjection probably stems from inherited, or epigenetic, self-hate. Kristeva writes, 'Antisemitism… is the sociological thrill, flush with history, that believers and non-believers alike seek in order to experience abjection' (180).

As I discuss in hexagram twenty-one, my father was always the most depressed person in any given room. But he was also incredibly funny and smart, and a junkie and a ne'er-do-well. Jewishness definitely played a part. And not the kind you might imagine from afar. This isn't the Woody Allen, Philip Roth, Bellow, Mamet, Mailer, kind. They were far too macho. (Yes, Woody Allen is macho.) The kind I came from were struggling with struggling with Jewishness, they were almost meta-Jews, post-Jews. Not one of them believed in God and they were all absolutely appalled by Israel's politics. So what made them Jews, if they hated Israel and didn't believe? If they married non-Jews? It is a legacy which is a way of thinking, where questioning, again

and again, choosing the next question to one-up the last, is considered the highest good. As Jabès writes, ‘A Jew answers every question with another question’ (*Questions* 117).

So, in Judaism you are exhorted to question, but this questioning both quells and quickens the human attachment to trying to capture, to know the unknown. Buddhism takes things a logical step further, telling us from the outset to move towards nonconceptual awareness as a way of moving away from attachment – in this case, by questioning that which is the cause of our suffering (Lopez). That said, Jews tend to move towards an acceptance of the non-dualist nature of reality the more they question: thinking eventually uncovers itself as the source of the problem.

When I went to reread Jabès, post-Auster, I saw Jabès’ formal choices as more radical than I had the first time around. I understood the intense co-dependant marriage of his form and content. *The Book of Questions* makes use of stark formal choices to express what has oft been called the unspeakable nature of the Holocaust (Mandel 203). Jabès work succeeds in making sense on a level, or what might better be described as in ‘a register’, that is unfamiliar outside Judaism. He doesn’t write poetry or narrative, philosophy or plays, yet all are contained in his work. He speaks as imaginary rabbis in conversation, or unnamed people in dialogue, he speaks as himself, as no one, and as his main characters: the doomed young Holocaust lovers Yukel and Sarah. He uses the forms of the Torah and the Kabbalah (both texts grounded in oracular moments, and arguably hermeneutically-induced

insanity) as starting points to represent the horror and trauma of the Holocaust. He collapses all barriers, he transcends I and thou.

Reading him echoes the abject horror of trying to recount a traumatic experience, while also capturing what it feels like to listen to someone attempting to speak of an ‘unspeakable’ horror. Somehow, almost alchemically, this combination produces a balm akin to what a growing consciousness uses in coming to terms with pain. Jabès words help the reader ‘survive’ the experience through the ‘coping mechanisms’ of disassociation, displacement and OCD-like repetitions in the text.

His army of imaginary rabbis, postulating on the nature of life, death and the book, feel like commentators on the Torah, but they aren’t. For one thing they are *atheist* rabbis, and they sprang from an atheist’s musings on evil (Jabès was an atheist). His work is not about what happened that was horrible, but that horribleness *itself* – Jabès needs to interrogate God, but expects nothing but the silence he receives. He chooses to lay it all on the table: his process is experiencing how to write the book, and letting us know, if we are reading attentively, that we are writing it with him. This is a huge responsibility to place on the reader, but it creates a connection like no other and one I have aspired to with the *Noracle*.

Throughout his work Jabès identifies himself as his characters, blurring boundaries and identities, agencies, intentions and roles. In people with lived-experience of prolonged trauma, these overlaps and confusions are all very common, but we don’t usually find them told in this way, in a way that echoes their expression of trauma. For, as in *The Book of Questions*, the

trauma victim seeks order in places that offer it in random, disordered ways; because they have been unable to rely on things they should be able to predict (other people, safety), they create complex inner systems, personal iconographies, and traditions that must be adhered to for a sense of safety that is entirely arbitrary. I chose the *I Ching*, and its manner of approach – each interaction unpredictable, determined by coins – because it mimicked the atmosphere of my childhood. Jabès makes a space for a hypervigilant, traumatised reader like me; he also introduces the non-traumatised to that experience.

Jabès writes with urgency; he describes this in a lyrical paragraph, '[h]e writes for the sake of his hand, his pen, to appease his eyes… Only writing can keep the writer's eyes on the surface' (*Questions* 53-54). He writes as I do, passively. And actively.

Before his book even begins, in a section entitled 'At the Threshold of the Book' (14) Jabès is upending expectations. Yukel and Sarah sound as if they are speaking, not writing, as if the other is present, and can hear them, as if they are in dialogue, but we are told the lines are from their journals. Jabès makes the reader reflect on what they read even before the beginning of the beginning of the book, in its dedication, which concludes 'AND, MOST OF ALL, TO YOU, TO US, TO YOU' and it continues on the facing page with 'You are the one who writes and the one who is written.'

So, before anything has begun, a reader is prepped for this literary adventure that feels like having tape wrapped over their eyes, and words whispered in their ears professing to be the words of different people but

spoken by the same voice. A dialogue of questions follows. An unidentified interlocutor and respondent speak in dialogue typeset like a play without formatting: the tab returned between characters. There are quotation marks, nothing more. The questions posed begin reasonably – 'What is the story of the book?' and 'Where do you come from?' – then, changing to reflect how we feel as we are given more and more enigmatic responses, 'I have trouble following you' (16-19). The writer has told us he is like Yukel, but not Yukel. And that the book they are reading is within the book:

> "You are a Jew, and you talk like one. But I am cold. It is dark. Let me come into the house."
>
> "There is a lamp on my table. And the house is the book."
>
> "So I will live in the house after all." (19)

The reader/writer is told they are in the book along with imaginary rabbis who 'come in small groups to give comments' (16). The dialogue establishes that the truth the respondent speaks of 'lacerates' him (18). We do not know what truth this is. Finally, at the end of the dialogue, one word jumps out: Jew. This is its first appearance in the text, the questioner says: 'You are a Jew and you talk like one.' And that's the truth. Elsewhere Jabès writes, 'Born in fear, the Jew dies of fear, however spelled out' (*Margins* 55).

Yukel is identified as a martyr, and Sarah as a scream. Far out as that is, Jabès uses narrative methods to delineate their relationship as he subverts them. There is a build-up, a meeting – but not between the lovers, no – between the reader and the lovers. And then the lovers are rushed away from

us. They were something to hold onto in all the confusion! We don't see them again after their initial quotes, not for pages, and then we are dropped right into the centre of their intense love, their intense horror, their timeless tragedy. Sarah screams and screams. Screams for Jabès are the voice of the wound created by the failure of words. Screams are the 'dawn of the text' (Poleg 110). For me, the scream resonates because it is… outside the book; the scream has escaped, ringing on and on as we as readers try and fail to fully parse its horror and meaning.

In Part One of *The Book of the Absent* (one of two books that come under the heading of *The Book of Questions*, the other being *The Book of the Living*) we are walking through city streets with Yukel. Towards the end of his walk, in an unnamed city, Yukel reads a sign written in white chalk:

> MORT AUX JUIFS
>
> JEWS GO HOME

Here is the painful yet inevitable intersection of permanence and impermanence, safety and oblivion. Do Jews finally go home when they die? Kristeva tells us that the Jew is '*Abjection itself*… And I who identify with him, who desire to share with him a brotherly, mortal embrace in which I lose my own limits, I find myself reduced to the same abjection, a fecalized, femininized, passivated rot' (185). Is death home? Yukel muses, 'I have erased, in my books the borderline of life and death' (58).

Kristeva writes that the Holocaust is the ultimate example of abjection (4). She felt that literature was a safe place for the expression of the abject, '…Great modern literature unfolds over that terrain: Dostoyevsky, Lautreamont, Proust, Artaud, Kafka, Céline' (18). Céline, a Nazi sympathiser. Kristeva goes to great lengths to explain his antisemitism while simultaneously appearing to champion his writing style for its great poetic catharsis (180). What Jabès manages to do with the abjection of the Holocaust is something entirely different, and I would argue much more thorough, moral and effective. Kristeva is, of course, arguing for the abject as the site of morality, as it is the ambivalence that actually enables us to know right from wrong, but in so doing she loses touch with the actual effect of antisemitism. The subject of antisemitism, not the object. Hero's Journey stories that speak of the evil of the Holocaust are ubiquitous, from *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas* to *Schindler's List*. But most fictional attempts are doomed. It was unspeakable and when we try to speak using the Hero's Journey structure we spew clichés. And even when a fine work of literature emerges, *Sophie's Choice*, for example, we are still seeing this imagined drama. Jabès wants to tell the truth in a form that mimics the chaos of truth. It is interesting to note, and for me heartening, that Jabès described the novel as something that assassinates the book (*From the Book* xvii). The book 'allows the writing to dominate' (*From the Book* xvii).

Gershom Scholem, the Jewish academic and Kabbalist historian draws a distinction between the intellectual traditions of Jewish philosophers and Jewish mystics. He observes that the 'fact of the existence of evil in the world

is the main touchstone of the difference between the philosophic and the Kabbalist outlook' (35). Jabès writes:

> …*"In the name of Good and Evil, in the name of*
> *Heaven and Hell,*
> *"in the name of the curve of the earth.*
> *"For we are the torment of logic.* (93)

Here Jabès mentions logic, and Jews being somehow the torment of logic. Why is it, how is it, that repeated questioning leads to this torment? Because logic only ever gets you so far in a world of complexity and, sometimes, evil. Jabès does not tell us a doomed love story. Instead of unfolding the story of Yukel and Sarah for us, Jabès folds it up before our eyes, like a magician performing an anti-magic trick, he turns a dove into an empty top hat. His ingenious solution to abjection: to implicate the reader. If all readers are writers, and all writers are Jews, (Ploeg 109) then all readers are Jews and all will be initiated into the abjection of the Holocaust. *The Book of Questions* comes into focus when we pull away from the book and focus on the (arguably) somatic impression it makes on us, the effect it has on us emotionally. The feeling of powerlessness, of wanting to know the truth, of wanting an answer that makes sense, of wanting to be told the story we are in. This is the position of the abused and traumatised – a position of one flailing wildly to be heard in a way that is unreasonable because reason was not to be found when it was most needed. And it is also sometimes the position of people who haven't had much bad luck or trauma; we all suffer.

A New Hope

My part in the *Star Wars* games of my childhood was Princess Leia. I never got the gun. I never got to chase. I had to stand in a garbage can on the corner and wait to be rescued and the boys always forgot about me. It utterly sucked.

Throughout the *Noracle* I try to express how I wasn't even hopeful enough to pursue my so-called journey. The hexagrams I've written are an uneven surface intentionally. I've always played with the reader not quite understanding where I am coming from. I am a very committed editor, but sometimes when a thought arrives in a form that feels off, I revise it but I leave the initial shape because, like Jabès, I want to recreate the unease. I summed it up in a fragment in *Madame B*, 'I stick with the word that's hard to understand because I think tripping on it – on that little incision or rut – is useful. You get stuck, or maybe fall; and as you pause or pull yourself up, you look around' (60). When you look around, you see, and as an oracle I want you to know yourself (that's my parting shot, in hexagram sixty-four) by becoming aware of what you see.

After my 'cancer journey' (ha – they actually use that phrase in the hospital, which does make one want to say, 'this is the worst fucking journey ever!') I became committed to lessening my suffering. If it meant stopping writing, something that had caused me such an immense sense of failure and pain, fine.

As the PhD funding had stopped I accepted some work as a TV screenwriter. When the producer first approached me, even though I needed money, I said no. I was fed-up with the written word. I said no several times. I had decided to devote the rest of my life, no matter how long (and then it was less clear, as treatment had just ended and cancer can return), to just being. To treating myself well.

The script the producer kept pitching was about a serial killer who makes his murders look like accidents by throwing his victims off cliffs; he's a mountain guide. This was one of the dumbest ideas I've ever heard, but strangely, I realised I enjoyed thinking about it. And though I never watch TV… I said OK. Thinking about the TV script, I got lost in it in a way I never have with my own writing. I attacked it like a puzzle, though I have never liked puzzles. It was an opportunity to address the Hero's Journey from within a very safe carapace: I could subvert the details while sticking with the structure in such a way as to undermine the hegemony of what the story has usually been used for. Or so I hoped, and continue to hope. The producer also paid me well.

I have been writing scripts off and on for three years (during both medical leaves of absence from the PhD) and have just had my first acceptance for a TV series. In some ways it is complete crap, but it has shown me that – like the old axiom says – the servant knows a lot more about the master than vice versa. I know the dictates of the story inside and out. My seemingly intuitive grasp of form sits well with my subversive characterisations; or at least, people seem to like it. Unlike in the literary world, so far those in film have

accepted me. They aren't suspicious when I name-drop Kristeva or petty when I misuse a philosophical concept – they love it, it's texture to them. They think I'm funny. As they describe it, I have a 'voice'.

Hexagrams sixty-two to sixty-four explain how I wanted to stop writing, how in a sense I felt that my failures as a writer, that terrible heartbreak, caused my cancer, and how I had fallen into scripts. In hexagram sixty-four, I was pleased I was able to offer a little hope. Of course, my luck with screenwriting may not last, but one thing Buddhism is helping me with is that I don't care that much whether it does. It is going well now, and that means at some point it won't be. Which is actually something the *I Ching* has taught me, finally, after decades of trying: all change, like clouds.

I still think the Hero's Journey (which I use in all my scripts because you absolutely have to in commercial work) is a force for ill but I now feel like I am in a position to maybe make a tiny difference to some corner of its content. In some respects, writing big dumb stories has been a way of letting my small, intelligent and terribly sad one go. It's 'in the bin' with my tumour. As for whether the *Noracle* is a vestige of that tumour, I'll leave that to the reader.

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