FROM MOUNTAINS TO MOLEHILLS: EPISODES FROM THE LIFE OF A SURVIVOR

incorporating the exegetical essay,

A Mirror Cracked: women, writing, healing

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June 1998

Submitted in fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts

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Volume Two

Exegesis Essay: A Mirror Cracked: women, writing, healing.

Table of Contents

Introduction

For a long time, I dreamed of writing an autobiographical account of my childhood because I believed in the political power of such stories. I believed that my journey through reclaiming myself as a subject could offer hope and possibility to other women who experienced similar violence. What I have discovered, and experienced along the way to the discovery, is profound and moving in its importance for me: my growth, recovery and creativity.

i) From Mountains to Molehills: episodes from the life of a survivor

From Mountains to Molehills covers a twenty year period in the life of Louise Kennedy, who at the age of four suffers the first of a series of sexual assaults by her stepfather. The novella traces and explores a series of episodes in her childhood, adolescence and early adulthood. Louise is a victim of incest and lives periodically in a home characterised by domestic violence. Her life is divided into compartments by place. She is either with her mother and stepfather in The City or with her grandparents, who raise Louise, in The Bush. Towards the end of the novella, Louise is no longer 'contained' in separate categories and she begins to work towards a fusion of the compartments in her life. The episodic structure allows for an autobiographical project that traces those personally significant episodes, events and experiences. Those things that most require 'sense-making' for an individual can be usefully written and explored using this structure. In *From Mountains to Molehills,* these include the gendered nature of family violence, the cycles of human relationships and frailties, fundamentalist christianity and an experience of class which communicates to the child a strong sense of her own inadequacy.

From Mountains to Molehills demonstrates the increasingly politicised awareness of the protagonist from quite a young age, as well as the theoretical framework from which the autobiography is written.

ii) A Mirror Cracked; women, writing, healing

A Mirror Cracked: women, writing, healing, is the exegesis component, or critical commentary, on the autobiographical novella *From Mountains to Molehills*. The purpose of the exegesis is twofold; firstly, it provides a framework within which I examine the theoretical and critical ideas in the relevant literary fields and across disciplines. Secondly, it provides me with an opportunity to take up those critical ideas, and any others that emerge, in the specific context of my own project. This engagement with relevant paradigms offers me the chance to examine the process of ideas and create a praxis; as we write autobiography we explore ideas about its writing and perhaps experience the sites of contest as we engage in the writing process. In the latter stages of this project this has certainly been my experience.

A Mirror Cracked: women, writing, healing seeks to identify and engage with those problematics that emerge recurrently throughout the relevant literature of the various disciplines which have expressed an interest in autobiography, particularly as it pertains to women.

In the chapter entitled *Literary Theory* I examine current thinking and debates about autobiography, particularly those written by women. I focus on the developments in critical thinking about autobiography which have most assisted me in the project of illuminating the gendered experience of women, namely feminist and post-structuralist criticism.

In *The Self* I explore common values about and understandings of the self and their relevance to life writing. This chapter engages with the specific subjectivities of the incest survivor and the impact on self, and therefore on any autobiographical project.

Memory discusses the issue of reliability and the particular implications for incest survivors in such politically contested territory. I briefly examine the 'false memory' school and describe how memory impacts on the reconstruction of personal narratives.

Finally, in the chapter *Incest: Seeking to Heal,* I draw on the work of other survivors as autobiographers to illustrate the role of incest testimony and memoir in healing. In *Incest: Writing,* I look at how this operated for me and the changing nature of the emotional experience of writing the most traumatic incidents of my childhood.

Methodology

In seeking to submit a creative work, in this case a novella, as a master's dissertation, it stands to reason that the exegesis which accompanies the creative submission will be specific, indeed unique, to that project. I had commenced the writing of my novella *From Mountains to Molehills: episodes from the life of a survivor*, prior to entering the MA, although I had not gotten far. Thus my concept of the methodology that I would employ was largely implicit and continually informed by my own practice in terms of what I felt did and didn't work for me. On entering the MA program, I was compelled to make connections between my literary practice and the scholarly environment which I had actively sought. Although painful at the time, that has been an enormously positive project.

i) From Mountains to Molehills: episodes from the life of a survivor

Throughout the writing of the novella I kept a personal journal[1], largely because I found the process so painful that it was at odds with my overriding political beliefs that writing the [incest survivor] self was a good and helpful thing to do. The constant emotional pain and difficulty recorded in that journal, particularly in terms of writing specific incidents, contrasts with the dramatic personal and political[2] gain that the total project has offered. The journal of writing *From Mountains to Molehills: episodes from the life of a survivor*, in many ways encapsulates the paradox of writing the self to integrate it, by using a writing process which is fragmenting as you proceed.

I commenced writing. By the time I entered the MA program, I had amassed no more than 8000 words. At the outset, I attempted to commence the novella chronologically. I was a relatively young feminist, having encountered feminism for the first time when I commenced my undergraduate studies. I planned a

[1] See appendices.

novella which would describe my experience whilst employing feminist theory to explain and contextualise the violence experienced by the protagonist, thus providing a manual for social change. In the early days of writing I was much influenced by the work of Doris Lessing, particularly *The Golden Notebook*[3], as well as Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*[4] and the oeuvre of Jeanette Winterson, particularly *Sexing the Cherry*[5]. I felt that these writers put the action of their novels firmly in a political context and I very much wanted to do likewise.

My determinedly chronological approach soon led to my feeling overwhelmed by the volume of the task in front of me. I went through many stages where I did not write at all. Throughout this time, I was still in therapy for issues relating to incest and often the project was just emotionally beyond me. But it was always in my mind.

By 1995 I was increasingly determined to resume the project. Further studies in English led me to the modernists and my reading of Eliot, Joyce, Woolf and others invigorated me once more. I now realise that it was crucial for me to 'break the back' of the therapy process before I attempted to seriously engage with the project of life writing. This matter of timing, which can be so frustrating whilst it is experienced, is really crucial in my view to the fruition of such a writing project. In this case, the timing was central and the frustration flowered into motivation and commitment. Realising that persevering with a style and structure that impeded me would restrict my progress, I began to identify and list my goals for the project: *Why did I want to write it? Who was the audience? What did I intend the 'reader' to get out of it?*

The answers to these questions offered ideas and material. I knew I wanted to chart the protagonist's emotional survival. I also wanted to make explicit the tools by which she survived. I wanted the complex mesh of happiness and affection and

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[2] In this context I use political to indicate my belief that the 'benefits' of a project such as this are potentially applicable to a marginalised group. This project is political because it seeks to promote social change and raise personal and group consciousness.
[3] Lessing, D. 1972. *The Golden Notebook*, London: Joseph.
[4] Atwood, M. 1986. *The Handmaid's Tale*, Boston: Houghton Mifflin.
[5] Winterson, J. 1991. *Sexing the Cherry*, London: Vintage.

fear and danger to be evoked. I wanted to communicate a political understanding of the events. And in addition to all this, I wanted to present a group of characters shaped by a range of factors such as class, religious affiliation, political allegiance and family dysfunction. These multiple goals for the project gave me many starting points. I began to identify specific events, experiences and feelings and compose short fictions around them. I called these fictions 'vignettes'. This 'system' was critical to the psychological *and creative* breakthrough I feel I had in 1996. This breakthrough was, and had to be, a meshed one. The processes of 'therapy': self reflection and writing, were necessarily interdependent.

Initially, I aimed to deal with creating a reservoir of material by keeping a journal of the creative process. By pouring my anxieties and concerns into that document, I seemed to free my writing mind from them. In a way, this action was a microcosm of the overall achievement of the novella itself: it assisted in resolving the angst around the issue. As the project continued, the journal offered valuable insight into the personal and creative fluctuations throughout.

One of these was my struggle to find the 'child's' voice, which became easier as I wrote more and yet more difficult as I was increasingly aware that the present mediates the past. The complex foreshadowing that crept into the work almost unseen [by me] created difficulties and confusions as the protagonist and authorial voice referred to events and experiences not yet written/read. I would often commence fictions in the past tense, adult voice and attempt to 'work my way down into' the child's voice. This was always a difficult and troubling process. I often felt as if, having silenced the child, I had to retrain her to speak. By writing incidents in the adult voice and then reworking them into the child's voice by evoking feelings I remembered, I succeeded. For each new vignette, I had to burrow through layers to find a voice I felt represented Louise. I had to do this to do credit to the goals of the project but I created enormous stress and angst for myself in this way.

As my confidence increased, I began writing much longer vignettes and my list of the 'scenes'[6] I wished to cover also grew. Progress was steady and I felt satisfied but it soon became apparent that the central theme of the work had not really been addressed in the writing. The first vignette I attempted dealt with a very early experience of incest but was muted and vague. As more scenes on the list were covered, pressure began to build to write the most painful and distressing aspects of the violence the protagonist, Louise, experienced. I knew quite clearly what they were. They stood out on my list as the few not in bold font, which I used to indicate completion. Eventually it became apparent that the project would stall if I did not get on with it. Given my goals for the project, what would it mean if I literally could not write these centrally significant pieces? I spent a great deal of time 'writing around the edges' of these seminal incidents. I wrote my way into them, coming at them from multiple angles and dialoguing with myself and my reader about my reticence. I have included little of this 'edge' writing in the novella, except where I believe it is truly necessary. The vignette titled *Dark* is buried in 'edge' writing.

Throughout the writing I had been researching the topic of women, autobiography and violence (incest). Initially I read many general critical works on autobiography. I read feminist theory on autobiography; discussions of women's writing and 'the' canon and incest survivor autobiographies. Much of what I read illuminated my experience and I began to see remarkable connections. Explanations for strange experiences when writing my own life were offered by some of this work. Feminist theory offered insight into why the project was so difficult in general, let alone in terms of the incest content. It seems to me now that this concurrent project was building up to something; some skill or device by which I was enabled to write the most traumatic material. This remains one of the hardest things I have ever had to do. Yet the implications, the fallout, of this experience have convinced me that my writing of my own life has been a powerful political tool of resistance and recovery. It is this realisation, and the reaching of it, which I will scrutinise in the exegesis section of the dissertation.

[6] 'Scenes' is how I remember certain incidents. I 'see' them, even ones involving me directly.

The very painful experience of *Dark*[7] was a Rubicon; having crossed it I had merely to write the remaining vignettes and start work on redrafting and rewriting. Having completed all the vignettes I had identified I looked over the work and felt some experiences that needed to be addressed were missing. These were added and the first draft was basically complete.

The writing of the first draft of *From Mountains to Molehills: episodes from the life of a survivor*, took about 24 months of real time. The meaning of the project of writing this life was profound for me and still takes my breath away. It is the meaning created for me in this specific project in the light of the work done on autobiography, women and memory, that I think warrants close examination.

ii) A Mirror Cracked: women, writing, healing

In order to commence such a *particular* examination of life writing, I needed to scan the work of feminist literary theorists, although I found along the way that non-feminist and gender-blind work also offered a rich source of information. The recurring themes about memory and reconstruction of the past were particularly significant in terms of my specific project and thus led me in the direction of memory towards social psychology, the recovered memory and so-called False Memory debates. The relationship of autobiography to the self was clearly revealed as central and necessitated an engagement with ideas about the self.

The central question posed in this exegesis asks firstly, can we conclude that women have used life writing to resist and recover from male violence and if so how have they done this? How has it operated? As the autobiographical project which accompanies the exegesis is explicitly concerned with this process, I have endeavoured to ascertain whether or not other women autobiographers have felt similarly to me and how the life writing process has facilitated or obstructed such a project.

[7] I examine the experience of writing *Dark* in detail, in Chapter Four.

My own identification throughout my autobiographical project of the relevance of the metaphor of mirrors for autobiography saw me searching for the same recognition in the work of others and led me straight to the oeuvre of Virginia Woolf, herself a victim of intra-familial sexual assault as a small child[8]. From there I moved to the autobiographical accounts and personal written testimonies of many incest and abuse survivors, searching for motifs in the creative work and statements regarding the role, positive or otherwise, that life writing had played in their recovery from trauma. I was overwhelmed by the spirit and passion for life writing many incest survivors demonstrated and I was invigorated by the tremendously positive statements many made about it. On a personal, psychological and political level, these women were advocating writing themselves back to wholeness, to integrate themselves again.

I envisaged at the outset that the exegesis would offer the opportunity to explore, in the light of critical work done, the notion that mapping the self as a subject involves drawing together fragments. For many incest survivors the self has splintered through common dissociative processes which constitute a survival technique.

I had some expectations but very little clear idea of how the creative project would mesh with my exploration of the theory. Undertaking the two in conjunction has offered additional meaning for me. A great many aspects of the project of life writing have been illuminated as a result of the concurrent walk I have taken through the universe of wild ideas on autobiography. I believe that many aspects would have remained mystified for me had I not embarked on this specific dual project.

As I researched this study, I began to notice the absences, not merely in the research but in my own conception of the topic. Whilst incest is experienced across social spheres, the discussion of writing about it is often limited to white middle class women. Indeed, since Virginia Woolf told us that to write we need 'a room of our own' most of us would be aware that the option to write at all is a

[8] For a detailed discussion of this see Chapter Four

privileged one, as is the seeking of therapy. Whilst I have tried to take account of research which addresses this exclusion, I have discovered very few autobiographical testimonies by women of colour.[9] Those I have read suggest to me the opportunity for further research. As the women's movement continues to struggle with issues of cultural difference, such research is needed.

Another difficulty I experienced with this study was finding a way to incorporate very personal material with an academic approach. It is a personal priority for me that I maintain scholarly conventions whilst communicating the powerful personal aspects of the issue at hand. I hope that as more creative work is produced and submitted within the academy, more dialogue about the convergence of these sometimes opposing 'genres' will occur. I believe 'our' work may suffer without the development of explicit, but flexible, guidelines and policy and procedures for creative submission.

A Mirror Cracked: women, writing, healing talks a great deal about the fragmenting experience of incest and the potential chaos that textual 'revisiting' may afford. It is ironic to me that even the research process I engaged in offered so many stops and starts, dead ends and discontinuities, continually evoking the theory I was reading. I saw many opportunities for further work which brings together creative writing with psychology, social studies and women's studies. The developing professional interest in narrative theory and therapy begs for a textual examination by a creative writer.[10] The relation of the self as a subject to personal narration is a dramatic one, yet scholarly work linking these areas is sparse. I conclude that writing traumatic life events offers healing and strength

[9] Those which do deal with similar themes to *From Mountains to Molehills* include Angelou, M. 1969. *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, New York: Random House, and Walker, A. 1982. *The Color Purple*, New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich.

[10] Worthington, K. 1996. *Self as Narrative: subjectivity and community in contemporary fiction*, Oxford: Clarendon Press. Also, Monk, G. 1997. *Narrative Theory in Practice: the archaeology of hope*, San Francisco: Jossey Bass.

Chapter One: Literary Theories of Autobiography

Just as patriarchal values and structures have informed social arrangements, so too have male views and values defined literary practice, even to the seemingly most personal of domains or genres of literary production. Lately, autobiography or self life writing[11] has seen a flourishing of critical interest[12]. Feminist literary critics have responded to the overwhelmingly gendered theories of autobiography which have conventionally been expounded. For the longest time it seemed that a male canonical template for autobiography dominated, and even where women did write their lives, they did so by challenging the template or making it their own, often at some cost. Women's work was commonly received as fiction, albeit autobiographical fiction, whether that was their intention or not.

Toril Moi offers a succinct description of the traditionally constructed autobiographical self:

> the seamlessly unified self...commonly called male...gloriously autonomous, it banishes from itself all conflict, contradiction and ambiguity.[13]

When canonical and gendered expectations of the autobiographer determine appropriate starting and ending points, the woman who does not 'identify' feels compelled to fit her written self to the template. Personal transformation is traditionally seen as heroic, desirable, central to the autobiographical project. Yet feminist readings of autobiography have shown how inappropriate such a model often is to women.[14] I would argue that the further act of personal validation,

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[11] Olney, J. 1980. (ed.). *Autobiography: Essays Theoretical and Critical*, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 6.

[12] In order to consider issues of autobiographical criticism for women, it is helpful to examine the traditional [masculinist] and canonical theories of autobiography which have held considerable sway in literary circles and often still do. A fierce debate has occurred contesting the generic laws which codify autobiographical practice. The law of genre necessarily means some texts are officially sanctioned and some are not. For further discussion of these issues in addition to Olney, (Note 7) see: Smith, S & Watson, J. (eds.) 1992. *De/Colonizing the Subject: the Politics of Gender in Women's Autobiography*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press; Bruss, E. 1976. *Autobiographical Acts: the Changing Situation of a Literary Genre*, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press; Stanton, D. (ed). 1984. "Autogynography: Is the Subject Different?", in *The Female Autograph*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press; Freeman, M. 1993. *Rewriting the Self: history, memory, narrative*, London: Routledge.

[13] Hooton, J. "Autobiography and Gender", in Magarey, S (ed.) 1992. *Writing Lives: Feminist Biography and Autobiography,* Australian Feminist Studies Special Issue, Adelaide, 34.

[14] Smith & Watson, *De/Colonizing the Subject*, xix.

through the act of narrative reconstruction, is a desirable part of the literary project. Yet for many women autobiographers this may seem nonsensical when measured again the traditional male model.

Feminist literary criticism has insisted that the 'practical' literary ground of autobiography receive feminist scrutiny, enabling women to graph the lives they lead. Florence Howe commences her work *Images of Women in Fiction* with an examination of autobiography because she sees that it is there that 'the connection between feminism and literature begins'.[15] This would suggest that autobiography offers a political lifeline to women oppressed by gender injustice; thus this connection is crucial. The autobiographer struggles with a project which should potentially be life affirming but which is surrounded by conventions and expectations which undermine. These conventions act as cultural stop signs. Feminist literary criticism unpacks the source of the proscriptions and neutralises many of them.

> If there is a typical literary form of feminism, it is the fragmented, intimate form of confessional, personal testimony, autobiography, the diary, 'telling it like was'.[16]

Firstly, feminist literary criticism offers the paradigm of social construction. Catherine Belsey suggests it is a basic feminist contention that no criticism is value free.[17] Thus it is revealed that the notion of a universal subject is necessarily exposed as an ideological construct, informed by social, cultural, economic and political factors.[18] Immediately there exists a blueprint for understanding why the dominant image does not reflect the woman staring at it. When Betty Friedan published *The Feminine Mystique*, she told us that many [middle class, American] women merely tried to live with the 'problem that has no name'[19] because they though it was them; they believed that they, individually, were flawed or failures.

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[15]Moi, T. 1985. *Sexual/Textual Politics*, London: Routledge & Co, 43.
[16] Wilson, E, "Mirror Writing: an autobiography", in Eagleton, M. (ed). 1986. *Feminist Literary Theory: A Reader*, Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 182.
[17] Belsey, C. 1980. *Critical Practice*, London: Methuen.
[18] Moi, *Sexual/Textual Politics*, 43.
[19] Friedan, B. 1965. *The Feminine Mystique*,. Middlesex: Penguin Books, 13-29.

Using a feminist post-colonial lens, Smith and Watson suggest autobiography may offer 'the ground of the universal subject to the autobiographer, as participation in narratives can secure cultural recognition for the subject'. But, as they warn, that same territory may implicate the speaker in the reproduction of the colonising process.[20] Smith and Watson alert us to the reality of race-and-gender blind theories about autobiography, that 'diverse subjects and forms of self-narrative are judged and found wanting using this [traditional autobiography] template.[21]

In taking up any autobiographical 'occasion', the subject known as 'the other' risks in order to dare. The incest survivor as autobiographer is particularly vulnerable in that the project may well be central to 'reframing' the self from victim to survivor. Yet the yardstick by which these stories are measured is necessarily complicit with the social and cultural arrangements which oppress women and reproduce sexual violence. Smith and Watson argue that, once entering ' the domain of Universal Man', the colonised subject can get stuck in 'His' meaning.[22]

This is where the links between literature and feminism can spill out into an ethical feminist activism. Feminist literary theory creates a space for recognition of the oppressive literary yardstick. We can become aware of the dangers of a universal "I" and its doubtful application to women's experience and projects.

It is the fissures, cracks and discontinuities which form the life and development of self for an incest survivor. Feminist work across disciplines has enabled recognition, understanding and acceptance of this and in turn a new value for the autobiographical work which emerges, documenting and reflecting this reality. Increasingly, canonist theories are critiqued and dismissed.

Patricia Waugh sees feminist literary challenges as having enabled women to work through the social constructions of identity and gender, meaning it is

[20] Smith & Watson, *De/Colonizing the Subject,* xix.
[21] Smith & Watson, *De/Colonizing the Subject,* xix.
[22] Smith & Watson, *De/Colonizing the Subject,* xix.

increasingly possible to experience the self as 'a strong and coherent agent'.[23] The implication for reframing the self in spite of the resistance offered by canonical notions of autobiography is a positive one. With the wisdom and affirmation of much feminist literary theory available, a dark and potentially dangerous journey may be illuminated. The spectres of genre-as-oppression have been made largely explicit, thus losing much of their sting (we may see them for what they are). Abel tells us that 'many women writers believe women remember what men choose to forget'.[24] Thus the illumination offered by feminist literary scholars has revealed a new understanding and response to gendered ways.

The project of feminist [auto]biography is potentially a subversive one. Inasmuch as the fractured discourses of many women's lives have been presented as abnormal and failed or not constituting "good" or "literary" life writing, continuing to tell our lives has met with increasing hostility[25] or incredulity.[26] Wood examines the testimonies of women incarcerated for mental illness.[27] Whilst Wood herself admits to anxiety over the veracity of each testimony, she notes how they combine to make a powerful political statement. The commonalties and the differences in experience create credibility when taken as a whole. Such testimonies, of experience of insane asylums or the incestuous family, chip away at the proscription on [female] life writing by revealing the implicit agenda which underpins those proscription. Linda Wagner-Martin, after writing a biography of the poet Sylvia Plath, concluded that 'telling a woman's life [including your own] had a become a dangerous cultural and literary activity'.[28] Wagner-Martin now believes the autobiography offers the opportunity to 'create the self' whereas biography emphasises a more traditional 'male subject' approach. I do not disagree with Wagner-Martin but I would suggest that such an opportunity, if it exists, has been furrowed out by feminists and post-

[23]Waugh, P. 1989 *Feminine Fictions: Revisiting the Postmodern*, London: Routledge p. 13.
[24]Abel, E. 1982. (ed.). *Writing and Sexual Difference*, Sussex: Harvester, 188. Whilst this quote has special implications for the autobiographical work of incest survivors, it may be taken in a number of ways. I would read 'include' and 'recognise' for remember and 'overlook' or 'deny' for forget. I think this is borne out by much work on female autobiography.
[25] Freeman M. 1993. *Rewriting the Self: history, memory, narrative*, London: Routledge, 150-174.
[26] Lejeune, P. "Women and Autobiography at Author's Expense", Stanton, *Female Autograph*, 208.
[27] Wood, M. E, 1994. *The Writing on the Wall: women's autobiography and the asylum*, Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1-9.

structuralists who have challenged gendered and canonical givens in recent years. Wagner-Martin suggests that many of the tragedies which make our lives as women [rape, incest, emotional and physical brutality] fall into the category of 'women's issues'. This is a clear contradiction when seen in the light of the "Universal Male" proviso for the autobiographical journey. Personal 'trauma' is acceptable for a man but for women immediately becomes political.[29]

Alpern *et al* remind us that feminist theorists are working to undermine the views embraced by male canonist critics. "Feminist projects in biography aim to address historical neglect, marginalisation or misinterpretation".[30] This is arguably the first step to challenging the codification of accepted autobiographical practice. Domna Stanton takes it further by framing her contribution to the debate with the term 'autogynography' or self graphing woman.[31] In an examination of the female autobiographical subject, Stanton identifies the differing critical response to the life writing projects of canonised male autobiographers such as Rousseau, St. Augustine and the like.[32]

Brodzki and Schenck suggest that autobiography "localises the very problematic of feminist theory: the reclaiming of the female subject".[33] Gertrude Stein actually produced vastly more experimental work than many who gained the approval of western male canonists.[34] Jouve suggests 'the writing of autobiography by women has been for many the women the road towards selfhood.'[35] Joy Hooton sees resistance to gender oppression throughout two centuries of Australian women's life writing. [36] Consistently the varied goals of the life writing project, when set by

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[28]Wagner-Martin, L. 1994. *Telling Women's Lives: the new biography*, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, xi.
[29] Wagner-Martin, *Telling Women's Lives*, 13.
[30]Alpern, S., Antler, J., Perry, E., & Scobie, I. (1992). *The Challenge of Feminist Biography*, Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 6.
[31] Stanton, *Female Autograph,* 3.
[32] Stanton, *Female Autograph,* 4.
[33] Brodzki, B & Schenck, C. 1988. *Life/Lines: Theorizing Women's Autobiography*, New York: Cornell University Press, 2.
[34] Watts, Richard, L. "Language and Identity: a critical analysis of Gertrude Stein's 'Three Lives' and 'The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas'". MA thesis. *Dissertations Abstracts International,* MAI 34/01, 69, February 1996.
[35]Jouve, N. W. 1991. *White Woman Speaks with Forked Tongue: criticism as autobiography*, London: Routledge & Co., 11.
[36] Hooton in Magarey, *Writing Lives,* 38-9.

women engaged in it, speak directly to their location on the margins or in challenge to the institutions which would define their subjectivities.

Sanders argues persuasively that the traditional canonist definition of autobiography is literally inverse to the needs of women writing autobiographically.

> "Autobiography must confer 'meaning' or shape on a life. Is the criterion alien to women living disjointedly as wives and mothers with no significant achievement [by this yardstick] to establish their identity?"[37]

It is clear, then, as Stanton suggests, 'the whole project of defining autobiography is what needs to be abandoned'.[38] Much of the recent feminist critical work on women and autobiography has been strongly influenced by post-structuralist literary theory.

> Post-structuralism has taught us to read the politics of every element in narrative strategy: representation; tone; perspective; figures of speech; personal pronouns... [39]

Gilmore advocates breaking down the canonical and generic walls around autobiographical definitions and thus moves the critical examination to a level playing field.

> Autobiographics marks a location in a text where self-invention, self-discovery and self-representation emerge within the technologies of autobiography.[40]

This notion of autobiographics [within a text] is an effective way of challenging the 'master narratives' which permeate traditional autobiographical models and even some more recent critique of women's life writing. Gilmore is adamant that the 'interrupted and fragmentary discourses' which constitute individuals are *not* [author's emphasis] the persons themselves. This theoretical stance distinctly

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[37]Sanders, V. 1989. *The Private Lives of Victorian Women: autobiography the nineteenth century England*, Hertfordshire: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 29.
[38] Stanton, *The Female Autograph,* 8.
[39] Benstock, S 1988. (ed.). *The Private Self: theory and practice of women's autobiographical writings*, Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 21.
[40]Gilmore, L. 1994. *Autobiographics: a feminist theory of women's self representation*, New York: Cornell University Press, 185.

challenges the traditional model as well as some readings of a feminist poetics of autobiography.[41]

Benstock fears the impact on women's self-representation, of the 'violence of ...theory'[42] in the context of traditional critique and analysis of autobiographical texts. Benstock describes women's autobiography as 'exemplary' as writing that works the borders of definitional boundaries.[43] Gilmore's theoretical approach offers a response to that fear by examining the connecting assumptions between textual theory and subject and making these explicit. It is the violence of theory as 'repressive inscriptions'[44] of generic law which represent such danger to the woman autobiographer. Gilmore's challenge seems to me potentially applicable to all theoretical approaches. Indeed, it is in the praxis [the living mesh of reading and writing autobiography *and* reading and applying theory] that the violence of theory is best illuminated, understood and disempowered.

Nussbaum demonstrates how post-structuralism can render generic laws inert by challenging underlying assumptions, since

> .. the self is an ideological construct that is recruited into place within specific historical formations rather than always present as an eternal truth.[45]

This is a potentially liberating concept. By pulling the rug out from under ideological, generic ideas about the autobiographical self, the experience of writing the fragmented and dissociated self is legitimised, merely because there are no longer rules and proscriptions. Such theoretical ideas are inclusive and validating of the diverse experience of women. Nussbaum believes the ideology of genre makes it possible to 'assume a unified and authoritative narrative position'.[46]

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[41] Gilmore, *Autobiographics,* 17.
[42] Benstock, *The Private Self,* 2-3.
[43] Benstock, *The Private Self,* 2-3.
[44] Benstock, *The Private Self,* 2-3.
[45] Nussbaum, F. 1989. *The Autobiographical Subject: gender and ideology in eighteenth century England*, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, xii.
[46] Nussbaum, *The Autobiographical Subject*, xii.

Nussbaum works within the paradigm of 'new historicism', which is characterised by a recognition of the 'ruptures and discontinuities' of history'.[47] This offers a challenge to constructions of the autobiographical self which is traced through ideas and themes about it throughout history. Nussbaum argues that

> The new historicism helps us avoid the naïve assumption that even the most detailed autobiography transparently describes an objective reality or that it is the principal task...of the critic to determine the accuracy of that self-representation.[48]

Post-structuralist informed ideas, coupled with gender readings of literary theories, negate the accepted 'givens' which have performed "gate-keeping service" for the western literary canon [including autobiography] for so long. The absences, the 'lack' or the unaccepted presences of women's life writings are demonstrated as being determined on the basis of premises which are gendered, racist and elitist and which proscribe the Other. Thus theory is clearing a space, a politically charged space, which recognises the politics of autobiographical practice and its poetics whilst enshrining the opportunity for it to flourish inclusively.

[47] Nussbaum, *The Autobiographical Subject*, 12.
[48] Nussbaum, *The Autobiographical Subject*, 12.

Chapter Two: The Self

> Autobiography localises the very problem of feminist theory...the reclaiming of the female subject, even as it foregrounds the central issue of contemporary critical thought, the problematic status of the self.[49]

> "Till this moment, I never knew myself."[50]
> Elizabeth Bennet, *Pride and Prejudice.*

The popularity of both producing and consuming autobiography indicates how desirable and much sought after an understanding of the "self" remains in contemporary culture. Gusdorf suggests autobiography is an effort to recapture the self; to know the self through consciousness[51]. The concept of graphing one's own life is inextricably linked with explicating aspects of the self, of one's identity. What exactly is the "self"? It has commonly and historically been understood to be the 'soul' or essential inner being. Recent theorists have attested to the socially constructed idea of the self and the ways it is identified and understood.[52] In common vernacular, we might ask *who am I? what makes me tick?*

Benstock considers that 'a theory of selfhood is always under examination in analyses of autobiographical writing' because, as she points out, the act of writing is one of self-positioning.[53] The value assumptions which underpin debates about self knowledge are challenged [particularly] by women writing themselves and their lives. Assuming, as I do, that self-knowledge is possible at least to a point, one needs to locate a place for the self, to identify what is felt and believed about the self, to start the autobiographical project. Thus the acts of self-positioning and writing constitute an on-going intermeshing process. But positioning does not mean 'knowing'. Sanders see the writing of autobiography as a way of reconstructing the self.[54]

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[49]Brodzki & Schenck. *Life/Lines*, 2.
[50] Jane Austen, 1813, 1972. *Pride & Prejudice,* Middlesex: Penguin, 237.
[51] Benstock, S. 1988. (ed). *The Private Self,* 11.
[52] Taylor, Charles. 1989. *Sources of the Self: the making of modern identity*, Press Syndicate, Cambridge: University of Cambridge, 177.
[53] Benstock, *The Private Self,* 1.
[54] Sanders, V. *The Private Lives of Victorian Women,* 30.

Schenck sees the attempt to understand the self via autobiography as 'hazardous'.[55] Perhaps the sources of the self on which we draw for our autobiographical projects are doubtful, themselves constructed from memory. Conway believes the difficulty of 'achieving a strong sense of selfhood' is attributable to the fragility of identity.[56] Those notions or objects on which we base our sense of ourselves are easily insecured or undermined, leaving a chasm within us or within our understanding of ourselves.

The relationship of autobiography to self-understanding is described by many theorists in terms of the individual struggle of the protagonist for self-sufficiency, independence and personal striving for success or achievement in a specific project. As we shall see, time and time again it is clear that such a model is at best unhelpful to women and at worst obstructive to the autobiographical project, because

> individuation as a yardstick for measuring autobiography makes women's autobiographies 'untranslatable' as individuation means separation of the self from all others.[57]

Many theorists have identified this yardstick of 'individuation' as hostile to the project of life writing for women. Hooton sees 'relatedness [as] the most common and consistent characteristic of women's autobiographies... the self in a context of relationship and judgement of the self in terms of ability to care'.[58] Stanton suggests that the '..female self [is] textually constructed in relation to others: mother, father, husband.[59] Since so much of that which we seek to understand is inevitably concerned with our relations with others, the project of writing our lives as women, or grappling with our selves at all, cannot be separated from our relations to and with others. To impose such a precondition is to exclude women from the project. When the autobiographical project deals specifically with the

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[55] Schenck, C. "All of a Piece; women's poetry and autobiography", in Brodzki & Schenck, *Life/Lines*, 290.
[56] Jill Ker Conway, 1994. (ed). *Written by Herself: Autobiographies of American Women*, London: Vintage, vii. This difficulty is compounded for incest survivors, as we shall see later.
[57] Friedman, S. "Women's Autobiographical Selves: Theory & Practice", in Benstock, *The Private Self*, 56. Friedman is quoting Rowbotham.
[58] Hooton, J. "Autobiography and Gender", Magarey, S (ed.) *Writing Lives*, 34.
[59] Stanton, *The Female Autograph*, 14.

experience of male violence, it is imperative that the politics of social relations take centre stage. It is evident that

> the female autobiographer takes as a given that selfhood is mediated: her marginality in male dominated culture...her fragmentation... social and political as well as psychic.[60] Self definition in relation to significant others is the most pervasive characteristic of the female autobiography.[61]

Writing the self through the template, across the demarcation, is a political act which inherently involves the recognition that the existence of such boundaries is oppressive to women. Thus

> we need ...a concept of self which recognises the inevitable role of social discourse in our self imagining and the authenticity of individual interior experience.[62]

The explicit self assertion on which much autobiography hinges, brings potential sanctions for women. The response of theorists such as Freeman and Lejeune to women's life writings reveals the very experiences which distort and distance the self, obscure the self, such as incest and male violence, are *questioned* when depicted through autobiography. Such challenges complicate further the rugged and painful terrain of writing one's life. The sense-making task, as we must believe autobiography to be at the outset, may be accompanied by or result in, a further fragmentation; that of *public sphere* challenge. Wagner-Martin describes a pressure placed on women to sanitise and disguise the realities of their lives.[63] Spacks see a 'female obligation' to self suppression.[64]

Further, the very act of reconstructing the lived experience and mapping it, graphing it determinedly for the reader, is depicted as an essentially unfeminine thing to do. Whilst many of us can scoff at such determinist nonsense, the reality is that culturally common notions impact on the self whether or not they are endorsed on a rational level, through internalisation of familiar social attitudes by

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[60] Brodzki & Schenck, *Life/Lines,* 1.
[61] Brodzki & Schenck *Life/Lines,* 8.
[62] Goodman, K R. "Elisabeth to Meta: Epistolary Autobiography and the Postulation of the Self", in Brodzki & Schenck, *Life/Lines*, 319.
[63] Wagner-Martin, *Telling Women's Lives,* 76.
[64] Spacks, P. "Female Rhetorics", in Benstock, *The Private Self,* 177-8.

women themselves.[65] Misogyny can be analysed and understood, which certainly reduces its capacity for harm, but does not remove it completely. At a fundamental level, the hostility with which women's life writings have been received is a form of victim blaming, through "complex social injunctions [which] complicate the autobiographical process for women".[66] Inevitably,

> direct self-revelation and self-assertion...conflict with ideas about femininity deeply inscribed in the culture.[67]

This conflict politicises in both directions. It "is...the saving of lives that writers are about. We do it because we care; we care because we know this: the life we save is our own".[68]

As I will demonstrate in the discussion on incest and autobiography, writing the self can potentially offer a source of healing through various modes of mapping and graphing of experiences which threaten the self.

Friedman suggests that writing our selves results from resistance to and questioning of the 'historically imposed image' of the self; the need to create an alternative self to the constructed one which simply does not fit.[69] By writing the female self, we challenge and amend the imposed self, writing lived experience and gender into the equation.

Images of the female self need to be constructed precisely *so that they exist*. Such images will necessarily include the experiences women commonly have on a personal and political level and where those levels intercede and overlap. Such writings '... serve as a means ... to create images of 'self' through the writing act, a way by which to find a voice'.[70]

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[65] Spacks in Benstock, *The Private Self,* 182.
[66] Wagner-Martin, *Telling Women's Lives,* 76.
[67] Spacks in Benstock, *The Private Self,* 177.
[68] Walker, A. "Saving the Life that is Your Own: The Importance of Models in the Artist's Life", in Eagleton, *Feminist Literary Theory*, 31.
[69] Friedman in Benstock, *The Private Self,* 41.
[70] Benstock, *The Private Self*, 3.

Hooton argues that 'autobiography is the linguistic embodiment of the self'.[71] Lionnet sees the autobiographical project as 'a narrative that depicts the journey of a female self striving to become the subject of her own discourse, the narrator of her own story'; striving for agency.[72] The self embodied, *once unified*, is a powerful political resistance and personal strength. But the journey constitutes the autobiographical project itself. This two part process involves what Lionnet calls the 'excavation of elements of female self which have been buried under the cultural and patriarchal myths of selfhood', not to mention the crushing weight of male violence.[73] This is demonstrated in a scene from Kate Grenville's *Lilian's Story*.

> I cowered in that flesh, my self shrunk to the size of a pea..
> ' he could breathe too deeply and scatter me into many fragments'.[74]

The motif of the fragmented and fragmenting self in women's life writing is a recurring one but is marked in its occurrence throughout many life writings of incest survivors, at odds with notions of the 'traditional' autobiographical self which is constructed as 'seamlessly unified and 'commonly called male'.[75] It has frequently been noted that woman's life writings tend not to be teleological; in fact, women frequently structure their narratives irregularly, preferring non-chronological, discontinuous, episodic structures.[76] We have seen evidence that this may merely reflect the reality of women's lives with selves much mediated by the various roles they either seek or have imposed upon them.

Whilst the state of the self as fragmented and incoherent is assumed to be negative and unification of the self the desired outcome, it is important to bear in mind the role of the fragmented self. Women's lives are so often lived in fragments just by virtue of their socially prescribed roles. Contradictory strands in the self are seen

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[71] Hooton in Magarey, *Writing Lives,* 31.
[72] Lionnet, F. "Metissage, Emancipation and Female Textuality in two Francophone Writers", in Brodzki & Schenck, *Life/Lines,* 260.
[73]Brodzki & Schenck, *Life/Lines*, 260.
[74] Kate Grenville. 1985. *Lilian's Story*, Sydney: Allen & Unwin, p. 121 [Also quoted in Hetherington, P. 1991. (ed.) *Incest and the Community: Australian perspectives*, Perth: Centre for Western Australian History, UWA, 92].
[75] Hooton in Magarey, *Writing Lives,* 34.
[76] Hooton in Magarey, *Writing Lives*, 34.

by traditional theorists as inimical to the autobiographical goal of a unified self.[77] Goodman accounts in this way for the disregard of epistolary forms of autobiography from the 'canon', as such writings are often characterised by discontinuity and contradiction, thus reflecting the life and self of the author. The absence of 'personal'[78] forms of writing has hidden that reflection.

Stanton credits recent French theory with recognising that the concept of the unitary subject as inimical to the feminist enterprise.[79] This suggests that even without the fragmenting trauma of male violence, such a model is unhelpful and even destructive to women. Such notions of a unitary subject seem to speak to a public sphere of endeavour, without the complicating private sphere strands of 'self, family and society'.[80] Such a model further denies the power differential between the public and private spheres.[81] Stanton sees a 'systemic tension' for women between their conventional role and a self with a vocation or ambition.[82]

So the fragmented self may be born out of gendered social relations but for the incest survivor, a particular kind of fragmenting occurs and this must be specifically addressed, in as much as autobiography has proved effective for some survivors in resistance and recovery. Lionnet speaks of the split subject as being narrating and experiencing selves who can never exactly coincide.[83] Incest survivors commonly testify to the role of life writing in preparing the fragments of self for a plaiting process, by which the strands are unified. Darlington tells of incest survivors who identify the project of writing themselves as 'reclaiming the self'.[84] Danica concurs; she sees healing as interdependent with rediscovering [and thus reclaiming] the self.[85] Brady describes 'us' [her family, incest survivors generally] as a 'fragmented lot'.[86] Trish Reynolds saw her recovery [and life

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[77] Goodman in Brodzki & Schenck, *Life/Lines*, 307-11.
[78] Here 'personal forms' of writing suggests personal letters and diaries or journals through which very many women wrote their lives.
[79] Stanton, *The Female Autograph*, 15.
[80] Darlington, Y. 1993. *The Experience of Childhood Sexual Abuse: Perspectives of Adult Women who were Sexually Abused in Childhood*, unpublished PhD thesis, Department of Social Work, University of Queensland, 59.
[81] Stanton, *The Female Autograph,* 13.
[82] Stanton, *The Female Autograph,* 13.
[83] Lionnet, in Brodzki & Schenck, *Life/Lines,* 262.
[84] Darlington, *The Experience of Child Sexual Abuse,* 54.
[85] Darlington, *The Experience of Child Sexual Abuse,* 57.
[86] Darlington, *The Experience of Child Sexual Abuse*, 59.

writing project] in terms of 'reintegration' of parts of herself she had lost contact with or been unaware of.[87] Reynolds describes being disconnected from the self she had known.[88] Describing a photo of herself at age eighteen months, "dar[ing] to hope that she and I are reunited as one",[89] Reynold's quest was to find the child within her and reunify the strands of self.[90]

Many incest survivors, and therapists, have spoken of dissociation as a coping strategy for emotional trauma. The concept of dissociation recurs throughout the literature and may be seen as a another way of describing the fragment[ing]ed self.[91] By peeling strands of self off, by dividing up the self, we are able to endure and survive. Indeed, throughout various paragraphs of her autobiography, Reynolds frequently uses multiple points of view and personal pronouns to describe herself. Splitting the self, dissociating back and forth as necessary, may be a way of protecting the whole self from the fragmenting part. In a way, the fragmenting self is kept at arm's length.[92]

Darlington has seen the power of testimony for incest survivors:

> these women...[survivors] are talking about real struggles to create a whole self from the fragments that remained.[93]

For Reynolds, the process of writing that fragmentation has been a beneficial one. [W]riting this story is the way to 'freedom and newness. I write because I must'.[94]

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[87] Darlington, *The Experience of Child Sexual Abuse*, 55.
[88] *Darlington, The Experience of Child Sexual Abuse, 55.*
[89] Reynolds, P. 1990. *Tricia's Song: An Incest Survivor's Story*, South Melbourne: Sun Books: Macmillan, 128.
[90] Reynolds, *Tricia's Song,* 128
[91] Raphael, B. 1995. *Recovered Memories: fact and fantasy*, Dr. Graham Dick Memorial Lecture, University of Tasmania, Hobart, 30th August, 1995, 17.
[92] Reynolds, *Tricia's Song,* 57.
[93] Darlington, *The Experience of Child Sexual Abuse*, 61.
[94] Reynolds, *Tricia's Song,* 57.

Chapter Three: Memory

'Memory is the fabric of our lives and our identities.'[95] At the outset of a project of writing one's own life, memory is central, memory is all. When that life writing project involves telling of political and personal oppression, child sexual assault, the common, cultural disdain for memory becomes very conscious. How does the feminist who writes (about) incest process our societal obsession with nostalgia and the myriad Golden Ages of Yesteryear, given the implicit recognition, constantly reminded, that her memories are dubious, fraught, unreliable? "An awareness of the fallibility of memory is as old as man's (sic) fascination with memory itself..." [96]

There is a plethora of published material on the topic of 'memory' within feminist literary responses and challenges to the 'generic' category of 'autobiography'. There was little of comfort to be found. These sources generally informed me that memory is unreliable; that the past can only be mediated by the present. Yet so much work on women's life writings was powerful, invigorating, promising. The challenge to generic theories, the understanding of redrawing the self, of desperately sewing the fragments together; this was freedom.

How, then, can they disparage memory, I asked? I don't understand. Don't they recognise the implications for the incest survivor? Surely they've followed the debate over repressed memories?[97] What's going on?

Meanwhile, I was writing my life, my *past*. And as this dual project went on, as I wrote more of my life, I realised I faced a conundrum: my memory was playing all sorts of tricks on me.

My reading became hungrier, more personal, more political. There must be a place where this contradiction can be resolved. Writing the lives of women is a

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[95] Raphael, *Recovered Memories*, Dr. Graham Dick Memorial Lecture, 2.
[96] Robinson, J.A "Autobiographical memory: a historical prologue", Rubin, D. (ed.) 1986. *Autobiographical Memory*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 19.

political act.[98] Deliberately or otherwise. So how to deal with the debilitating impact of memory?

It can be done. I have done it for myself and I am persuaded. It was possible for me to resolve the terrifying inconsistencies and contradictions which emerged for me and taunted me to question my own memories. I understand now. I can trust memory. It is out there for me and its wisdom is far greater than mine.[99] This pervasive belief in the unreliability of memory can certainly be dispiriting but could also be much more seriously detrimental to the psyche of the woman seeking to write [right] herself.[100] Whilst I have stated at the outset that the project of resolving this memory dilemma has been at least partly fulfilled for me, because I see that as the pressing denouement of this particular autobiography, I wish to explore the implications of and evidence for our popular understandings of memory.

The discrediting of women telling their memories is not new. Freud stated that 'hysterics' suffer mainly from reminiscences in his *Studies on Hysteria.*[101] That memory plays a role in the mental health of those individuals, who are dismissed by psychoanalysts as neurotic, speaks volumes. Why would these dim, dark, unreliable ideas about the past create such havoc in the mind? Popular psychology is peppered with references to repressed memories, albeit without the political import they take on when associated with memories of past sexual violence. The working through of the life of the child is the backbone of psychoanalysis: 'the neurotic person was driven by experiences he or she could not forget and struggled to avoid remembering.'[102] It does seem the discrediting of memory is particularly gendered and when dealing with women's recollections of male violence, psychology has always kept its options open, as noted by Scott et al:

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[97] Raphael, *Recovered Memories*, Dr Graham Dick Memorial Lecture, 2.
[98] Douglas, L., Roberts, A. & Thompson, R. (eds.) 1988. *Oral History: A Handbook*, Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 28.
[99] Raphael, *Recovered Memories,* Dr Graham Dick Memorial Lecture, 3.
[100] Many incest survivors have written testimonies of their experience and agree that they writing of the self plays an important positive role in healing and recovery.
[101] Anderson, L. "At the Threshold of the Self: women and autobiography", in Monteith, M. 1986. (ed.). *Women's Writing: a challenge to theory*, Sussex: Harvester, 54.
[102] Robinson, in Rubin, *Autobiographical Memory,* 20.

> psychoanalytic theory and the public understandings it has promoted, would have us believe that females cannot be trusted, that they should not be listened to, that they fantasise, fabricate and mislead. They should not be believed.[103]

The so called 'false memory' lobby has a great deal to say about specifically 'recovered' or repressed memories, although the focus tends to be on cases where no memory at all was had until the victim-survivor is an adult.[104] Inflammatory examples of reclaimed memories from previous lives are offered as evidence. There is no attempt made to consider the meaning of such a claim: that it may well be easier to respond to memories believing them to have happened to 'another' person in a different body. Dissociation is not uncommon for survivors of child sexual abuse and may proceed memory repression.[105]

As circumstances and social arrangements change, memory, our source of our selves, is what links us to the person who experienced that trauma in 'our' past. The plural implies that we are made up of more than one 'self' and that we become a series of selves separated from each other through the constraint of the 'presents' we occupy. Thus the commonly identified psychological traits of the incest survivor may be the present manifestations of a past trauma.[106] Popular meanings attached to the concept of 'the past' often imply that it is over, finished, rather than just a different place. Such implications are detrimental when we know for ourselves that the 'past' is not yet, if it ever will be, done with. That is why the 'sense-making' aspect of memory is so significant. When grappling with the unattainable nature of the past in popular discourse coupled with the reality of its

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[103] Scott, D. McCarthy, T. & Gilmore, K. "A Tribute to Dora - supporting adult survivors of child sexual abuse." in Hetherington, (ed.) *Incest and the Community,* 202.

[104] In Wassil-Grimm, C. 1995. *Diagnosis for Disaster: the devastating truth about false memory syndrome and its impact on accusers and families*, New York: Overlook Press, Dr. Wassil-Grimm, psychologist, conducts an unscholarly discussion with no evidence and extremely inflammatory examples to discredit therapists who work with clients [accusers] who have repressed and recovered their memories. In spite of an examination of the apparent history and theories of memory, which is entirely unreferenced, Dr. Wassil-Grimm still subscribes to simplistic discrete notions of truth, describing two options; historical truth [real] versus narrative truth [perception/experience].

[105] *Recovered Memories*, Dr Graham Dick Memorial Lecture, 17.

[106] Many traits have been identified as correlating with the trauma of child sexual abuse. These include: low self esteem; dysfunctional sexuality; excessively controlling personality; emotional insecurity; fear of intimacy; intense anger (passive or overt) and disordered eating. For a detailed discussion of this issue, see Bass, E. & Davis, L. 1992. *The Courage to Heal*, New York: HarperCollins.

legacy in our lives, the need to make sense of, to understand if not resolve, may be an urgent one.

As I searched to make sense of the contradictions of memory, I found snippets of information which started me towards a conclusion I could not yet grasp. What was this, just out of my reach, which would resolve this dilemma for me? I had to resolve it. The value of the project hinged on it. Without resolution, I doubt if I would have continued.

Brewster gives a useful application of the difference between autobiographical memory and personal memory. Reminding us that 'personal memories are typically accompanied by a belief that they are a veridical record of the originally experienced episode', [107] Brewster illustrates with the example of his sister's wedding. The date, place and time of the wedding are factors for autobiographical [public sphere] memory; although we might be sure we remember our sister's wedding date, if the register says otherwise, we will usually be convinced. However, if our memories of seeing the wedding car decorated with shaving foam are challenged, we will mostly refuse to concede, as we know what we saw, even if we are not sure on what exact date it occurred. As we have seen above, the significance of the event (versus the date), determines the memory.

This distinction is highly significant for incest survivors, who repeatedly preface their personal testimonies with statements which indicate that what they experienced constitutes the memory, not when or how often or what room they were in:

> "I can't really remember how it changed from exposing himself...to raping."
> "When things happened isn't very clear, like exactly what age and so on.[108]
> "I was about twelve, I can't remember exactly."[109]

We see that the event is overwhelmingly the significant memory and details which are not important fall away. It is the inability to bring forth those details which has seen so much discrediting of women's memories, greatly obstructing

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[107] Brewster in Rubin, *Autobiographical Memory,* 27.
[108] 'Ann', quoted in Ward, E. 1984. *Father-Daughter Rape*, London: The Women's Press, 31.
[109] 'Sonia', quoted in Ward, *Father-Daughter Rape,* 6.

the healing process. Whilst formal records are crucial for the project of history, they are not and should not be the responsibility of women and children enduring male violence. As Lowenstein says:

> If you want a date, go to the records; if you want the flesh and bones, the love and hate, ask the people who were alive on that day.[110]

Brewster speaks of flashbulb memories[111]; the flash in our minds when asked *'where were you when JFK, John Lennon, the Princess of Wales died*?' I know the answer to the John Lennon question but I only know the date because it is much revisited in the popular press. It was hot, that much I know, because I see myself lying on my mother's bed in the middle of the afternoon and listening to the radio. Suddenly there is a news flash. I do not know what I was doing that year; I could work it out, but I do not remember. I do not know what day of the week it was, suffice to say it was not a weekend. At the time, those things didn't matter. The death of a peacemaker is what I remember and how I cried and tried to find someone who would cry with me. When Diana died, the date was significant because of what it represented: the last day of the Northern summer. It is to such significances that memory adheres.

When memory is measured by our knowledge of the date, the time, how often, what were you wearing, we feel it less, so we learn to trust it less. By knowing how our memories work and why they did it that way, we validate them. This is crucial if we are to map our selves in any meaningful way.

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[110] Lowenstein in Murphy, "The Voice of Memory", *Historical Studies*, 162.
[111] Brewster in Rubin, *Autobiographical Memory*, 36.

Chapter Four: Incest

(i) Seeking to Heal

The degree and significance of this project for my personal healing were not issues with which I seriously or explicitly engaged at the outset of the autobiography. I was completely unprepared for the impact of the project on my life in intellectual, emotional and political terms. Whilst this impact has been overwhelmingly positive, it has also been felt in such layered ways, in so many areas of my life, that I think the nature of the impact is well worth close examination. My project became a kind of living praxis, as the threads of the literary, academic and psychological project began to weave into personal and spiritual corners of my life, and the research, creative writing, scholarly writing, and therapy all began to speak to each other, even in ways I had not consciously conceived. I had not the slightest concept that a largely academic and political project would be so personally significant. I can only describe the impact of this MA as a major life changing experience. Whilst the cost was often high emotionally, the reward has been extraordinary.

An examination of the literature around life writing by incest and child sexual abuse [CSA] survivors offers some indication of this profundity. The women's movement has provided a theoretical home for righteously angry writings about male sexual violence.[112] Against a background of the developing feminist therapeutic field for the treatment and support of survivors, many feminist activists have used survivor testimony to set a context for political writings. Kadar asserts, for example, that

> life writing about incest intersects in very concrete ways with feminist social practice in the non-literary sphere of feminist psychotherapy and jurisprudence.[113]

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[112] Brownmiller, Susan. 1975. *Against Our Will,* Harmondsworth: Penguin; Diana Russell. 1986. *The Secret Trauma: incest in the lives of girls and women*, New York: Basic Books; Catherine Mackinnon. 1989. *Towards a Feminist Theory of the State*, Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press.

[113] Kadar, M. (ed.) 1992. *Essays on Life Writing: from genre to critical practice*, Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 136.

There is much contest over the impact of incest and CSA between professionals in health, psychology and welfare. This contest has itself been identified as a source of secondary abuse[114], as debate rages over all sorts of peripheral issues. Various schools of feminist therapy are largely in agreement on the potential impact of CSA, which often manifests in victim-survivors in broad ranging symptoms including depression, low self esteem, self mutilating behaviours, eating disorders, chemical dependency/substance abuse and destructive sexual relationships.[115] I believe that attempts to identify specific behaviours as necessary outcomes of incest and CSA are unhelpful. Many traumas endured by women in a world with patriarchal values will produce these symptoms and behaviours. Not all women with low self esteem or eating disorders are incest survivors. I would argue that in my experience, it is the *dramatic loss or negation of a sense of self* which underlies many destructive behaviours displayed by incest survivors.[116] It is the role of the self in recovery and the specific role of life writing in regaining or unifying the self, that I wish to examine and discuss.

Dissociation, a psychological term which describes an experience common to many CSA survivors, is the loss of a sense of self or a feeling that the self is not intact.[117] One might experience the self being assaulted as another being, a different character, as Elly Danica describes in her autobiography, *Don't*: "I peeled myself out of my own skin".[118]

Danica uses a combination of first and third person voices, sometimes in the same sentence:

> I am no longer myself. I am someone else... someone I used to know sits on a white brocaded bench ... a body sits here naked. The body tries to cover itself.[119]

Freeman identifies the task confronting the autobiographer as one involving the

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[114] For a discussion of this, see Bass & Davis, *The Courage to Heal.*
[115] Darlington, Y, 1996. *Moving On: women's experiences of child sexual assault and beyond*, Leichardt: Federation Press, 2-5.
[116] Darlington, *Moving On*, v-vi.
[117] Darlington, *The Experience of Child Sexual Abuse*, 59-60.
[118] Danica, E. 1988. *Don't: a woman's word*, London: The Women's Press, 53.
[119] Danica, *Don't*, 52-61.

> appropriat[ion of] the knowledge [trauma, incest] into the self to integrate it so as to get on with life.[120]

Freeman sees value[121] in such a process as part of the autobiographical project, depending on how we engage with it. The autobiographical task, according to Freeman, is to appropriate the knowledge 'so as to get on with life'. Whilst many incest testimonies would indicate that the appropriation of the knowledge involves *separation of it* from the self, integration of the self is indeed desirable. What seems necessary for the women surviving male violence is to integrate the political knowledge *with personal understanding* rather than the mere knowledge of the experience itself.

Freeman is describing the process of drawing the strands of self, dissociated from each other, together. This is no straightforward task. Such a project requires a *concept* of a sense of self from the outset, whilst many incest survivors report feeling precisely the opposite[122]. A developing sense of self ebbs and flows in intensity during fluctuating periods in the recovery process. Whilst I see some value in Freeman's blithe recipe for integration, I would further argue that it places a masculinist spin on the process. By this I mean Freeman does not relate his model to experiences of women, in a private sphere where sexual assault is not uncommon. Such a unified, linear approach is usually the province of those who are blind to the contradictions women deal with constantly.[123]

Appropriation and reconciliation of the potential impact of the trauma is what I would see as desirable, bringing as it does a recognition that while my status as an incest survivor is *not* the *only* thing which defines me, it nevertheless plays a

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[120]Freeman. *Rewriting the Self,* 169.

[121]Freeman, *Rewriting the Self,* 169. [This is a helpful insight, rendered largely useless by its immersion in Freeman's discussion of Sylvia Fraser's autobiography, *My Father's House; a Memoir of Incest and Healing*. As Fraser's memoir recounts her experience of incest throughout her childhood and adolescence and then traces her lifelong quest to 'integrate' the self, Freeman's hostile, dismissive criticism of what he calls Fraser's 'incoherence' is a total contradiction of his point. In fact Fraser is gradually collecting fragments of herself. So uncomfortable is Freeman, either with the horror of Fraser's suffering, or her feminist understanding, that he cannot see the author engaged in precisely the project he has outlined.]

[122] Darlington, *Moving On*, 41.

definitive role. In order to take up the scattered, damaged fragments of the self and start weaving, the survivor must *begin* to accept the nightmarish legacy and commence acceptance of an enduring interdependency between past and future (and present). There are enormous structural and emotional impediments to such a project. This is a bitterly painful, traumatic process that is sometimes just too hard. It is by no means likely to be the 'unified and linear' process so many canonists and critics desire to see depicted in autobiography.

Recognition that integration is likely to be an emotional ambit claim for many survivors of CSA can be the beginning of a kind of reconciliation. Autobiographical 'occasions' offer the chance to see aspects of a process of identifying lost and damaged strands of the self. Writing one's life offers particular advantages, agonising though they may be. Benstock says that given the theoretical and lived contradictions of autobiographical reconstruction,

> writing the self is therefore a process of simultaneous sealing and splitting that can only trace fissures of discontinuity.[124]

Benstock's point underscores an assumption that ending up with 'fissures of discontinuity' is something we can come to terms with. It is not inherently undesirable or unfinished; but if so, that can be reconciled. The point is that the incest survivor as autobiographer must recognise this. It is not an easy lesson. I suspect that coming to understand that dissociation often manifests in this way is one of the hardest lessons to learn. The 'split off fissures' of the self exist precisely because our 'selves' sought to protect us.

Whilst writing my autobiographical novella, with its discontinuous, fragmented stops and starts, I was concurrently researching other women's autobiographical writings. Just as I did not set out with the assumption that writing my life would provide a healing, unifying experience, I discovered that many incest survivors felt the same way. Time and again, the project of autobiographical testimony is identified as a [culturally] political one, in the deed or in the act of speaking.

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[123] Bass, E. & Thornton, L. 1983. *I Never Told Anyone: writings by women survivors of child sexual abuse*, New York: Harper Collins, 24.
[124] Benstock, *The Private Self*, 29.

Subsequently, the autobiographer locates healing and strength which frequently emerges from the groundswell of the autobiographical process.

> I would suggest many incest testimonies come about because the motivation to write is an unconscious or semi-conscious one.
> ...at 15, she began writing poetry, finding it to be a healing experience. She notices this subsequently. [125]

It seems logical to me that the *threat* that writing one's divided, dissociated self poses is in polar opposition to the experience many women have once their life writing projects have been *realised*. But these polarities represent the opposite ends of a journey. The danger is very real at the outset. It would be illogical, if not impossible, to anticipate 'healing' or integration, as the life writing commences. The very act of textualising the experience of assault involves stepping out further into the dark. The passing up of the illusion of "control" which denial, repression, dissociation creates, is an enormous hurdle for many women who have years of experience of life without [the illusion of] control.

> For the violated child to expose the incident is to expose her own insignificance.[126]

Even if the writing project is undertaken long beyond the experience of immediate harm, the revisiting of one's own insignificance is terrifying and may seem weakening. Yet, the reality for many incest autobiographers is that the written experience shrinks and decreases in significance. I do not want to suggest that the catharsis is a complete and whole one. I do not believe the self is unified or the incest trauma completely expunged. I argue for a convoluted process of stages by which this occurs, sometimes only in part. *But the first process of textualising can make real to the writer the possibilities offered by autobiography*. Suddenly a life-defining incident is no bigger than an A4 page. How can it fit there? How can it be contained? *I* put it there? *I* controlled its flow onto paper. I am still here. This discovery has made me immensely stronger.[127] McNaron describes how others have experienced this:

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[125] Lynn Swenson, "From My Half Sleep", in Bass & Thornton, *I Never Told Anyone,* 117.
[126] Bass & Thornton, *I Never Told Anyone,* 13.
[127] Darlington, *Moving On*, p 13-14

> Their own sense of the empowering force of writing out of our worst feelings and fantasies...bringing them out of the shadows began to get them to a manageable size.[128]

In addition, the revisiting of the incident, the re-remembering, may be a [re]fragmenting process in itself. There are dangers everywhere. The process is unquestionably fraught. It is not just the 'telling'. Those parts which represent the most danger to the self, known or unknown, will be the hardest to write. So suddenly we have a system of diagnosis. This is much harder to tell than that. Why? The answer may be found in the writing, or the writer may realise it is better not to write it at this time. And when (if) finally that particular episode is recorded onto paper, full of fractures, fissures and discontinuities, we see something. In my case, I saw that the danger was in *not* writing. Writing was the easiest way. I did not fragment. The fissures and fragments were in the writing, not in me, as Gilmore concurs.[129] They were there for a reason. Feminine textual devices, the subject of male/canonist criticism, can be a salvation. This was my life and these devices helped me to a healing way of writing it. I did not even recognise them until they had helped me fill the pages. Others say similar things:

> I've grown while writing my incest story...
> A Story of Telling my Truths: revealing and transforming myself....
> Telling this secret, gives me strength. I am empowered and transformed, no longer a victim but rather a survivor.[130]

> But I am no longer daunted. I write because I must. For me, this is the way to freedom and newness. There is power in naming. I can take that power. This knowledge impels my pen across the page.[131]

There are many ways in which incest autobiography can play a healing, unifying role. The exposure of incest, even years later, can illustrate to the victim that they *were* a victim and thus cannot be blamed. The righteous anger with which the women's movement has received these testimonies can be a healing salve. The strength required to revisit the past and retell and thereby relive can create enormous awareness in a survivor of her capacity to cope and that she has a right to that strength and determination.

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[128] McNaron, T & Morgan, Y. 1982. *Voices in the Night: women speaking about incest*, San Francisco: Cleis Press, 17.
[129] Gilmore, *Autobiographics*, 17
[130] McNaron & Morgan, *Voices in the Night*, 81-90.
[131] Reynolds, *Tricia's Song*, 57.

> Women's writing that exposes incest can move subject from victim to engaged survivor.[132]

> By writing we put form around what has always been chaotic. Writing shapes, focuses, limits, and establishes minimal distance. Our monsters become manageable, our dreams more real if not more possible.[133]

Making 'form around the chaotic', placing 'limits' on the experience or 'monsters' helps us to see them anew: in a context. The powerlessness which so warped our experience is reduced. As our power increases, the view changes. If writing has the power to move us from victims to survivors, we are becoming powerful beings in ourselves, particularly in contrast with the children we were. As a resourceful, empowered, feminist adult, my understanding and self-empathy can grow and flourish. Thus, my autobiography provides the opportunity to write my own healing.

(ii) Virginia Woolf: the other side of healing

> The [se] women [who write their incest testimonies], despite the pitfalls, snares, and risks, are stronger, prouder, and feel better about themselves because at last they have the courage to tell their stories.[134]

It is tempting, given the celebration of healing, self-esteem and strength which the process of the autobiographical project may bring about, to forget or lose sight of the 'pitfalls, snares and risks'. But they are always there and the autobiographer may be caught therein. It would be disingenuous at best and largely dishonest not to engage with an potential example of an extraordinarily successful autobiographical project which failed to play a healing role for the writer. Woolf's autobiographical writings are profound, such is the degree of her engagement with the whole issue of life writing. Textually and aesthetically these writings are certainly successful. I do not want to suggest that Woolf would measure the success of her life writings and memoirs with this yardstick. I concur with her latest biographer, Hermione Lee, who suggests that the reduction of her work to this level would have appalled Woolf.[135] But we have seen that many autobiographers did not explicitly identify such goals, including those of inner

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[132] Kadar, *Essays on Life Writing,* 133.
[133] McNaron & Morgan, *Voices in the Night,* 18-19.
[134] Bass & Thornton, *I Never Told Anyone,* 14
[135] Lee, H. 1997. *Virginia Woolf*, London: Vintage, 159.

healing or personal strength. Writing autobiographically did not resolve Woolf's childhood emotional trauma and she took her own life two years after commencing her autobiographical project.[136]

When first I read *Moments of Being*, I was struck by Woolf's own comments about her sexual assault and her use of fiction to identify her personal demons.

> It must have been a strong feeling [about being assaulted by Gerald Duckworth aged approximately six], since I still recall it.[137]

Woolf used fiction to work on her family and her own understanding of life and human relations which that family had both produced and prevented. Her loss of her mother at aged thirteen is central to her life and art, argues Lee:

> This peculiar grieving formulation of an absence, in interruption and a continuation would be returned to for the rest of her life. Coming to terms with this interruption, laying this ghost to rest, is one of the secret plots of Virginia Woolf 's existence.[138]

To The Lighthouse clearly evidences this point; the significance and fascination Mrs Ramsay holds (for characters and readers alike) and her centrifugal relation to her family demonstrate Woolf's obsession with the Victorian family model and her attempt, aesthetically, to drag that model into modernity.[139] Perhaps Woolf believed the next age held less dangers for women in the family.

> *To The Lighthouse* is not so much 'about' Virginia Woolf's parents as about what to do with them, how to think them through or 'think through' them.[140]

Virginia Woolf decided to 'exorcise' her parents and the problems of her childhood by writing *To The Lighthouse*.[141] The use of fiction to 'think through' her family, as well as 'think them through' appears, by her own admission, to have served Woolf well. If Lee's assessment is correct, and there is much to bear

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[136] Lee, *Virginia Woolf,* 713.
[137] Woolf, V. 1976. *Moments of Being*, ed. by J Schulkind, Hertfordshire: Triad/Panther, 69
[138] Lee, *Virginia Woolf,* 79.
[139] Many Woolf scholars have suggested that the depiction of Mrs Ramsay's death, almost as an afterthought, is highly significant in terms of its challenge to the traditional Victorian deathbed scene.
[140] Lee, *Virginia Woolf,* 80.
[141] Poole, R. 1995, (first edition 1978). *The Unknown Virginia Woolf*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 185.

it out, Woolf did extraordinarily well to slay the ghost of her lost mother. She comments in *Moments of Being*:

> When it [*To The Lighthouse*] was written I ceased to be obsessed by my mother. I no longer hear her voice; I do not see her.[142]

> The Angel in the House [Stephen family descriptor for their mother, Julia]... when I came to write I encountered her with the very first words...and she made as if to guide my pen...I turned on her and caught her by the throat. I did my best to kill her... Had I not killed her she would have killed me...she died hard...She was always creeping back when I thought I had despatched her.[143]

The same cannot be said for her writing about the 'malefactions'[144] of Gerald and George Duckworth, both of whom she identifies in her various autobiographical writings as having sexually assaulted her.[145] Woolf described Gerald Duckworth as having 'ruined her life before it had fairly begun'. Roger Poole traces the impact of that assault and its circumstances as having disastrous implications for Woolf's sexual relationship with Leonard Woolf.[146] Poole also suggests that Woolf's life-long pattern of disordered eating is attributable to the assault by the elder Duckworth taking place just near the dining room.[147]

> Let us not forget the cataclysm caused by the surfacing in Woolf's mind of the continual sexual abuse she had suffered, and her astonishing capture of this in powerful autobiographical writing, nor the effects on her awareness of Freud's denial of the reality of such pain.[148]

Stanley believes Woolf achieved 'astonishing capture' of her sexual abuse in her memoir. I would argue that such an achievement constitutes a major advance towards resolution and integration of the self, the experience of abuse and its legacy.

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[142] Woolf, *Moments of Being*, 81.
[143] A quote from Virginia Woolf's Lecture *Professions for Women*, 1931, in Lee, *Virginia Woolf*, 79.
[144] Woolf, V. Letters Vol 1, 25 July 1911 (to Vanessa Bell). Quoted in Lee, *Virginia Woolf*, 156.
[145] Woolf, *Moments of Being*; also unpublished paper delivered, *22 Hyde Park Gate* to The Memoir Club 17 Nov 1920, quoted in Lee, *Virginia Woolf*, 155. The Duckworths were Virginia's older half brothers.
[146] Poole, *The Unknown Virginia Woolf*, 54-58. I would caution that it cannot be concluded categorically that Woolf's 'difficulties' in her sexual relationship with Leonard were *not* a manifest of her bisexuality or lesbian desire.
[147] Poole, *The Unknown Virginia Woolf*, 54-58.
[148] Stanley, L.1992. *The Auto/biographical I: the theory and practice of feminist auto/biography*, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 37.

In the period leading up to her death, after she commenced *Sketch*, Woolf was reading Freud and writing the sexual 'history' of her family. In the period after the war broke out there were many severe stresses to endure; the blitz, the recent tragic loss of her nephew Julian Bell in the Spanish war. There was further anxiety about a possible invasion by Hitler, which at the time seemed quite plausible. As Leonard Woolf was Jewish, this posed a terrifying emotional stress. By late 1940, Woolf was enduring one of her many episodes of mental illness. Lee claims that Woolf feared she would not recover from this 'breakdown'.[149] On Friday 28 March, 1941, she took her own life.[150]

The implication of writing one's personal history of sexual abuse and patriarchal oppression whilst reading germane sections of Sigmund Freud would surely be significant, and exacerbated for someone on the precipice of emotional disintegration anyway. Roger Poole's persuasive thesis throughout *The Unknown Virginia Woolf* is that neither Leonard, nor her nephew and biographer Professor Quentin Bell, understood Woolf's mental illness in the context of her sexual exploitation. Poole notes,

> Virginia Woolf had herself documented the reasons for her own mental distress, and very intelligently 'exorcised' certain key persons and passages from her conscious or unconscious life by writing them fully out. The novels were an account of the mental distress: how it had been caused, how it manifested itself, and how it was overcome.[151]

Woolf described how she had to "make myself play a game of assembling the fractured pieces".[152]

Louise De Salvo argues that such a scenario throws into sharp relief Woolf's changing perspective on her autobiographical project *as she read Freud* throughout the last months of her life. De Salvo argues that reading Freud precipitated a crisis. It is entirely likely that the contest between Freud's explanations for incestual abuse would have had an eroding effect on Virginia Woolf's sense of self.

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[149] Lee, *Virginia Woolf*, 766.
[150] Lee, *Virginia Woolf*, 759.
[151] Poole, *The Unknown Virginia Woolf*, 31.
[152] Virginia Woolf Diary entry, 15 April 1939, quoted in DeSalvo, L. 1989. *Virginia Woolf: the impact of childhood sexual abuse on her life and work*, London: The Women's Press, 99.

> If Virginia Woolf accepted Freud's thesis (on CSA) which it seems she did, this meant she would have to see herself as mad.[153]

By November 1940 Woolf believed that her autobiography was "too circuitous and unrelated; too many splutters, as it stands.."; she had begun to deny the fundamental accuracy of her memory of the past.[154] Given Woolf's belief in Freud (he was published by Hogarth), the impact of his determination that CSA was in fact the denial and displacement of childish feminine desires and fantasies must have been traumatic and terrifying. Whilst we have no evidence that she believed and accepted Freudian theories on CSA, the convergence of events suggests increasing fragmentation. Woolf dispensed with autobiography. Shortly before she ended her own life she said, "I intend ... no introspection".[155]

The combination of terrors confronting Woolf is enough to explain her suicide, her recurrent mental illness and much else besides. Woolf had a lifelong close relationship with her sister Vanessa Bell but even there she did not have unconditional emotional support or sensitive understanding. Her relationship with Vita Sackville-West, while close and sustaining, did not last throughout her life.[156] The Bloomsbury creed of openness on matters of [hetero]sexuality did not extend to a critical analysis of male sexual violence. Quite the opposite.

(iii) incest: writing

....claiming the darkest parts of ourselves.[157]

I cannot say that writing my autobiography saved my life or ended my struggles with the incest legacy. There are many facets to that struggle or more generally to the struggle of being a child who grew up surrounded by violence. I was already a strong, feminist woman well on the way to healing when I conceived and commenced *From Mountains to Molehills.*

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[153] DeSalvo, *Virginia Woolf: The Impact*, 124-127.
[154] DeSalvo, *Virginia Woolf: The Impact,* 130-1.
[155] DeSalvo, *Virginia Woolf: The Impact,* 132.
[156] Lee, *Virginia Woolf*, 484-511.
[157] McNaron and Morgan, *Voices in the Night,* 19.

Even at this stage, as I proofread and edit my autobiography and linger anxiously over some of the 'darkest parts', I find it hard to articulate the extent to which this project contributed to a unique form of healing, to a 'finishing off' process I did not know was outstanding. I now see this representing the beginning stage of a partial, nuanced closure. If closure is the last stage of healing, and for me it is, then that stage has commenced. Necessary to such progression has been the underlining of those aspects which are still raw and wounded.

I have been writing stories and poems for years. I have written as a way of breathing. I cannot imagine *not* writing; a life without writing (my own and other people's) holds no attraction for me. But I had never experienced such difficulty in actually putting pen to paper. Why did I hesitate and prevaricate? Initially I told myself it was a thinking through process, a reflective state necessarily sandwiched between making the decision to write and writing. But this reflection wouldn't end unless I killed it. I forced myself to write. I came up with 'writing' to do' lists and followed them literally until I had 1000 words. I tried writing for 40 minutes without a break; writing 500 words in a sitting four times a day. Nothing made the process less torturous. Each night's journal entry referred to the process as 'sweating blood' and 'agony'.

At this point I was not writing incest testimony literally, although it soon became apparent I was writing 'round the edges'. (The metaphors with which I describe the entering in process are all consistent. I wrote 'round the edges'; I 'burrowed down'.) Even what seemed quite amorphous incidents from a childhood were agony to write. It was not emotionally painful, but it did feel like digging ditches. There was very little progress in return for very hard slog.

I devised a list of 'vignettes'; of childhood episodes and periods I wanted to cover. I worked through this in no particular order, basically just avoiding the deeper, more painful emotional material. Gradually a pattern formed. As I stood back and looked at the 'vignettes' I had amassed over a two year period, I could see it was not specific episodes of incest I was having trouble writing. In fact I wrote those first. Ironically, I did not find writing them especially painful. I was thrilled by what I felt was powerful material. The material I had mentally identified as

'deeper, more painful' was something else entirely. A chance remark by my supervisor gave me a label for this particular material. I called it *Dark*.

I cannot say that it got easier to write these most painful episodes from my childhood. It did not. I prevaricated and wrote every other possible incident I could justify including and a few I couldn't. I had tried once very early on to write *Dark* and had produced a paragraph. I had been in a public place, called on by people every few moments, which proved an effective strategy for addressing the severe distress I experienced trying to write these episodes. But I could not continue and the paragraph I produced was contextless. Then, extraordinarily, I lost it. I lost the disk and hard copies. It was gone and I would have to revisit it and write it again. I think it is significant that the 'lost' pieces did not have the enormous impact of the later writings of the same incident.

My journal from this period is full of debates with myself about why it is so hard, and how to do it so as to make it easier. I decided I would do it in a public place again, as I had before. I chose a major university library and sat in the busiest thoroughfare. I wrote three pages 'around' the issue. I discussed with my reader my avoidance of telling whilst so wanting to tell. I recognised that I wanted to tell; but I didn't want to have to hear it again myself.

I didn't write *Dark* that day.

I went home very angry with myself; all that grief and no finished piece to show for it. I began to wonder how I would ever get this incident down on paper, let alone edit it for submission. The next morning I tried a different strategy. I would simply 'vomit' it on to the page and then reward myself in the most cheering, distracting way I knew how: retail therapy. I do not seriously suggest that this prosaic bargain with myself was the catalyst. I must have reached the place where I could finally get it out. All that grieving 'round the edges' had taken me somewhere.

I did 'vomit' the torture of my Siamese cat by my abuser onto 3 or 4 pages. I then flew in hysterical tears out the door and onto the tram.
As I travelled towards retail solace, I could not stop pondering why I was so distressed. I can write any episode of sexual assault and feel nothing more than

anger. I can even write the repeated physical assaults on my mother with little difficulty. Why is this issue still so painful for me?

In my writing of *Dark*, I debate that very question. I examine the specific subjectivity of a child in that dreadful situation: blackmailed by her stepfather to submit to him to save her cat, whom he tortures anyway. The circuitous, fractured narrative which occurred organically in the writing of *Dark* offers insights into both the nature of this type of life writing and the equal problematic of specifically recording such experiences. In writing the specific incident, I am breaking a family and cultural tradition of silence about male violence. I am inching out on a dark limb. I do not say this for its grandiose implications. In fact, I think I have a feminist responsibility to do it, in my current position of strength. I say it because it illustrates the point that narratives written, spoken, shaped in the dark will be fissured, fragmented and jagged.

After the writing of *Dark*, I did feel a sense of triumph. The incident was there on some sheets of paper (and on 3 different disks!). Agony though it was, I was still here and amazingly, I was stronger. It was an astonishing feeling. I would never be quite so vulnerable again.

This experience was so significant to me that I began to seek more specific statements about women's incest testimonies. Where previously I had been looking for the political resistance through life writing, I now began to look for examples of healing or wholeness. I certainly began to feel in the weeks and months after writing *Dark* that a further unity had come to me. I could now refer to and speak of the incident without floods of tears and complete loss of control. As a result, I could process it more. Through that, I began to examine theories about transference.[158] Previously, I had been dogmatically, violently opposed to such theories. Now I asked myself, why was I so wedded to my single-minded ideas about this episode? Transference began to make a great deal of sense. I also

[158] Whilst transference as a term in psychology usually applies to an potential aspect of the client-therapist relationship, it can also apply to a process whereby identity is merged with, or 'transferred' onto, another being or even an animal. For further discussion of transference, see G Gabbard & E Lester, 1995. *Boundaries and Boundary Violations in Psychoanalysis*, New York: Basic Books; C

came upon incest testimonies and autobiographies which contained similar incidents. In particular, Sylvia Fraser describes her father's threats against her cat.[159] Before writing *Dark*, I would never have been able to read such material. But now I stayed with it and realised the pattern I could see. By using my cat, my stepfather sought to destroy any strength or resistance I could find. This happened to other victims. By facing up to the meaning of that, I finally come off the hook for my cat. I could not protect her because no one protected me. I do feel that it is amazing that I am only just understanding this now. It seems so elementary for a feminist whose theoretical understanding of male violence is sophisticated. But I sincerely believe I was emotionally unable to even consider such ideas before I collapsed the worst, most terrifying episode of my childhood to a few hand-written pages, and put it out there for others to read. If I can contain it, I can come to understand it. Maybe I will one day control it.

I think there was enormous healing power for me in the meshing process which occurred between the theoretical and creative work. I commenced my autobiographical project well before doing any research on the subject. I studied no life writing at all in my undergraduate English degree. Once I began to research theories of autobiography, memory and other survivors' experience of writing incest, I started to examine my work in different ways. So much of the theory was there in the writing. So many of the difficulties were foreshadowed. All the discontinuities I had planned to 'edit out' were suddenly explained. I had been trying to write to an implicit linear model which was now discredited, or at the very least, unhelpful to my needs. At the outset, I felt frustrated by this. Now, I am at peace with it.

Classen & I Yalom. 1995. *Treatment of Women Molested in Childhood*, San Francisco: Jossey Bass.

[159] Fraser, S. 1987. *My Father's House: a memoir of incest and healing*, New York: Houghton Mifflin, 12. On page 152 Fraser discusses her own agony for her cat, thirty years later. She too is reduced to tears merely by saying Smoky's name.

Appendix A

Excerpts from the Writing Journal

of

From Mountains to Molehills: episodes from the life of a survivor

13th February, 1995.

Thought I'd better keep track of what I do each session; what needs doing next etc.

13 October, 1995

I have come both a long way and not so far. I am increasingly aware of the impediment of any kind of depression, lack of affect or even just slight emotional to-ing and fro-ing on writing and creative productivity generally. However, the supervision at VUT has definitely clarified things for me and I have a broader, surer vision of where this work is going. I have a much stronger practical sense that I can and will do it. I have written a lot really since ending BSW and although I don't write nearly as much as I want to, knowing the relationship between self and capacity to create is a crucial insight.

11 November 1995

But today has been one of the worst writing days I have had and that comes after a period of considerable nothingness. Since I started at RMIT, I have really done nothing and before that even. So today I sat down to re-do a vignette I started this week about the period at Scott Grove, including some more of Louise's trials and experiences, and it is just a disaster. Primarily, I cannot get out of the adult voice and no matter how I try I cannot get back into her head. The frustration is so painful I am constantly on the verge of tears. Of course, reading that damn article in Saturday Extra about so-called repressed memory syndrome hasn't helped either. Scott Grove/GCS is just clearly a very hard period emotionally to write.

Try to brainstorm the feelings she felt then, why is it so hard, that it is so hard now surely is the key to how it felt. I don't think my mind wants to go in there.

30 November 1995.

The psychic block just gets worse and worse; I am absolutely miserable and frustrated and I am mostly unsure of what to do. After battling with the vignette about Gardiner and Scott Grove, which I called Threshold, I gave up.

This week I tried to write one about Mrs. Cooper and St. Meg's, which is only very patchily successful, called Looking In. But I have been reading Plath's Letters Home and they frequently refer to the associate psychic difficulties which many writers have.
Plath refers to the build up of writing 'inertia' which results from having limited time to write. It is helpful to read the various things she says. She mentioned getting helpful insight from a non-fiction work by Woolf.

The agony of failure and pain associated with this project is just immense. I am stunned by how much it hurts and how I just want to run away from it. But I will NOT. Tomorrow I will write another vignette and so on until I'm writing something every day. It will come back. And I can write the painful bits at Melbourne Central or at The Angel or somewhere where it will be OK.

December 3rd, 1995.

There is no easy way to make the process happen; it is damned hard, physically, emotionally, psychologically, and spiritually. So be it. I am tough, I am able to cope with most things, I am very strong. I will just keep going and noting what I learn about the process.

Friday December 15th, 1995.

Reading the material Uncle Doug sent me has really upset me but what can you do. Memory is so unreliable but I also know that Doug has no reason to lie and I absolutely (??) know he is not lying. Mum now accuses me of hating Grandma. Ironic really. I need to know what Grandma was capable of to be able to plead for her. But I am so pleased with what I wrote today.

Sunday 24th, December, 1995.

There are certain times/environments when I just can't write and I should work with that. It would be good to occasionally take a day off and go to a place, say like Portarlington, to have a few days alone to merely write. I can't write when someone else is around. I have too much need of distraction. The wee smalls would be another good idea.

Saturday 6th January, 1996.

It is absolutely true that I hate writing with anyone in the house. Weird. I feel invaded, intruded upon. I feel angry at Geoff. for even being here. I will need a schedule. Maybe we could split writing here with writing in the State Library.

Monday 8th January, 1996.

Writing begets writing, anyway. I am sailing along, and keeping on like this will mean I will cover a lot of ground. I think for the hard ones, I should just bite the bullet, take the laptop, write them onto disk at the State Library and get them done that way. I should probably avail myself of the way my thoughts have been going lately. There must be a connection: mental preparation for writing perhaps??? And I don't even realise it?

Wednesday 17th January, 1997

This week I have felt that I have achieved less, much of what I have written is bitsy and won't hang together without a lot more work and I'm feeling quite dispirited.

Thursday 23rd May, 1996.

I agree more and more with Jong. If you just keep writing, inspiration always comes. Energy is harder to find. Nothing I try seems to change things. I used to have more willpower than I do now to change things. This project is the hardest 'study' thing I can remember doing.

Thursday 25 July, 1996.

Time just flies and I have so little, except angst and tears, to show for it.

But as for the above entry I am still sweating blood, emotionally. Ordinary writing, like the one above, is as Blanche D'Alpuget said, like digging ditches. Specific writing about the central point of *From Mountains to Molehills* kills me before I even start. And lately I just can't get it back, although I never push through long enough to see if pushing through would do it.

I know when it's good and it hasn't been good lately. Not at all. I have a few ideas, structurally speaking, for pursuing incest and animal stuff but there is no question it is going to set me back.

Saturday 27th July, 1996.

I had a bad couple of days this week but I do feel I learnt from them if only I could articulate what I learned exactly!! I felt angry and unable to get my best work but then it came to me that I was skimming the surface, writing only the upper skin of an event so the themes and underlying sides of various events were not be captured; hence the term 'shopping list'. It came to me on Thursday night what I was doing wrong but unfortunately then I did not have the energy or will to grab it and write it down. What I have learned is:

a) I must just do more writing of every kind. Fiction, journal writing, this journal etc. I must just connect head with pen more often and that is a major plank in making it happen. I have neither written nor read much lately and that is a problem.

c) Reflect: I need much more reflection time than I have been taking. This is how ideas and solutions come to me. It was a good idea to focus and do nothing more because just study and writing time is only part of it: reflection and planning time are crucial. Nutting and mulling over ideas and ways of approaching problems is a big part of the creative and research process. I really think I have now learned that lesson.

There is no getting away from the pain that writing causes but I have decided on a path to write the really difficult stuff: go away to a cheap motel for a couple of days and just do it. That is the answer, because once I write those pieces, events I will feel like I've crossed the Rubicon.

Saturday October 5th, 1996.

I have given a lot of thought recently to 'biting ' the bullet and getting on with writing the awful stuff. I have to do it, soon, and maybe doing it will help me with the personal psychic aspects of it. Everyone says writing the past is painful, there are questions of degree but I am not alone in it. I must acknowledge that I am afraid that the happiness I currently enjoy will be horribly cut short and changed in the long term, that I will be no longer able to function as I do now. If I want to tell this story it is a chance I have no choice but to take.

There are certain areas of the story I want to tell which I have avoided; not just the cats and the incest/violence but also "Bob" generally. I have to do those and bear the pain.

Monday October 7th, 1996.

On the weekend I will come back to the piece. If I make it a short one I'll have to do another one. But given that it might be difficult, I am not going to force myself to do a long one on the really hard stuff at this stage. A long one and a short one would be fine.

It has been going better since I changed my attitude and that is a significant revelation.

Wednesday 19th November, 1996.

I wrote a bit of a vignette in the library at RMIT yesterday and I typed it up on the new computer this morning. Each time I go near it I cry (it's about "Satin") but at least I've made a start. I must just push on. Geoff. has an exam tomorrow and when he goes I'll make a real vomit effort on that and the other vignette and when I've done drafts and typed them up I'll go shopping to Barkly Square on the bike. Having a shop and a bit of fun will take my mind off it. I'm also going to set up a fiction page at work which I will give a password and just cut and retype as I get things or rather save them onto disk and bring them home. I can type dreadful things and then have to pick up the phone or see a client or talk to someone or some such thing and that has been effective in the past. I am closer than I have ever been this time. If I can get through 3 -4 really horrible vignettes I can start to coast on redrafting and focusing on what stays, what I need, etc. which would be much more pleasant.

Thursday 21st, November 1996.

I have just written one whole vignette about the seminal incident with Satin and part of one or a short one which is really a germ about the incident at St. Elizabeth. They both need hard editing and are much shorter than I anticipated but as it was agony to write them I can live with that. The worst is over?? It is awfully hard but it can be done and it ceases to be quite so awful once it is done. Staring one's demons down, staring them in the face, does work. It does. It takes some of the power away. I guess I did actually cross the Rubicon.

I did them straight onto keyboard which I haven't done for a while but really it was to avoid having to suffer twice so to speak. I think it was a good decision. I will have to spend time on the weekend knocking them into shape but that won't be as hard as writing them in the first place. They add up to less than 2000 words. Seems unfair for all the effort they require. But the net gain is enormous.

Sunday 24th November, 1996.

It is not happening now. Satin suffered dreadfully but I have perceived her suffering as though it was as manifold as my own, including my remembrances of things past. This is not the case. It is still her pain and fear that most sets me off but I am better. I have stared it square, if not stared it down.

This is going well. I don't *think* it will ever be so hard again.

Sunday 5th January, 1997.

I used to say that I couldn't write with anyone in the house but that is not true. Either it is long since gone, or it was a red herring to what was really stopping me. I happily write these days with Geoff inches from me. And today is 37 oC and that hasn't even stopped me. Amazing. I have overcome a lot of hurdles.

Wednesday 15th January, 1997.

I wrote part of what may be the last vignette this morning. It is so weird. I feel strange about it. But I wrote some full on stuff about violence to Mum and felt...quite numb. I think I have turned off mentally since the end of the vignettes was in sight.

Wednesday 26th March, 1997.

I am so despondent now. It is so hard. Every option will involve a lot of rewriting. But why should that make me despondent? That is a chance to perfect the thing. I'm not in any hurry, am I? really? I've got time to finish it and I'd rather slave over it and get it right than toss it off now.

Wednesday 2nd April, 1997.

It is on the way. I struggled with the last vignette, *Up*, for ages before it came but it did come and it's good. It's good. It comes back if you give it a chance.

Wednesday 28th May, 1997

I have to do some serious work on structure and then comes rewriting...yah. Can't wait for that one. Perhaps that's why I am putting it off? But I must find a structure so I just have to do it. *The Bell Jar? Up a Road Slowly?*

Sunday 2nd August, 1997

Got an email from Rosaleen last week saying she has finished reading *The City* section and really likes it! She thinks its a strong beginning and end and very much clearer. What a buzz!

Sunday 19th October, 1997.

The inertia is bad but I must just endure and push through. Just one word in front of the other.

Wednesday 22nd October, 1997.

12.30: Not so easy as just 'starting' .... the whole order and structure of *Bush* needs to be reconsidered. So that's what I am doing. Onward Macduff. I know the goals for *Bush* so just do it. Hah! Famous last words.

8.10 pm: I have written part of a new vignette called *Graft* I found it frustratingly, tear-jerkingly difficult. I had forgotten how difficult. I do not have a finished vignette, for a whole afternoon's work, but in spite of it being an unimaginative shopping list, there are a few little germs.

I am always so negative and frustrated and judgmental on my self at this stage. I must try to be more positive and just live with the frustration and difficulty. Of course I have a lot of inertia. I have not written *From Mountains to Molehills* for the best part of a year. I want everything perfect yesterday. I will congratulate myself for getting as much done as I did on my first day back. I will shed the bits that are not so useful and keep the germs. Well done.

Sunday 26 October, 1997.

Finished a first draft of *Graft*, incorporating *Amareille*. Pleased with it. Good stuff. Inertia better, although it's early days.

10.40: Most pleased with progress. Feeling less frustrated. Onward and upward for another week.

Tuesday 28th October, 1997.

Not a good day today. Oh well. Yesterday was good. I worked on *Graft* in a coffee shop in Bourke Street. That was great. I got quite a lot done and enjoyed it immensely. Actually just the way I say I always want to write; over a long mac. in a coffee shop.

Wednesday 29th October, 1997.

Good day, good day. Getting better. Keep at it, bit by bit. I have now done two, *Graft* (Amareille) and rewrite of *The Despicable Trick*. I am pleased: they work. I am gradually getting my voice back and I am enjoying it. It is very painful but much less than it used to be.

Monday, November 17, 1997

Fair to middling. Getting a bit of progress. *Summers in Yeppoon 2* is now complete and although may need some chopping I'll do that later. I am quite pleased with it, even if it is a shopping list (stop that!).
Now onto *Gladys*.

Wednesday November 26 1997

Good progress being made. I am very pleased with what I have gotten done; it's great. Once *Bush* is done, I can do the rest and then link it for final submission.

Wednesday 25th March, 1998.

Worked a bit on *City*, less there than I thought, except for *Dark*. Have to work substantially on that but it needn't take long. Just gotta do it. I'm feeling a bit happier with the structure than I did before, as it seems to be coming together. That is, the structure within vignettes.

Thursday, April 02, 1998

Not a bad week. Worked on *Dark* and other bits in Brunny Street, sitting in the Black Cat. I find it easier all round lately. I can stick at it for longer, concentrate better for longer and even enjoy it more! And the lessening of difficulty with *Dark* was phenomenal. It wasn't effortless but it was much less difficult than I was fearing. I am really pleased.

I feel very happy with the progress I have made so far. I'm really getting there. I wonder if the improvement is because I am so close? So I have to push a long way through the next one to get that feeling? Oh Gosh!

Wednesday, April 15, 1998

Kris and Rosaleen have both read it now. Kris really liked it, she said she cried all day because of so much suffering but Kris is a bit like that. Rosaleen seems happy with it too but more about that tomorrow.

Tuesday, April 21, 1998

I saw Rosaleen last week and she made very few suggestions, a few minor typographical ones.... Kris made 4 suggestions, very minor but very helpful. I think it is very close to done.
Kris really liked it and her reaction to it as a whole has really given me confidence. I am very happy.

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APPENDIX B

Examiner's Reports

Examiners Reports for *From Mountains to Molehills*

I have decided to include the two examiners reports for this MA thesis, in the belief that their inclusion would be helpful to those scholars who might peruse this thesis for a point of reference for their own submission, as well as to writers who might wish to know what the response was to this work. I recognise that this is not common practice. Examiners reports usually remain a mystery to scholars. This was my decision alone.

Kathryn Hegarty

CONFIDENTIAL

VICTORIA UNIVERSITY OF TECHNOLOGY

RESEARCH DEGREE

EXAMINER'S REPORT

Degree of Master of Arts

1. Name of Candidate: Ms Kathryn Hegarty
2. Title of Thesis/Major Work: From Mountains to Molehills: Episodes from the life of a Survivor
3. Date of Submission: 26 June 1998
4. Name of Examiner:

5. **RECOMMENDATION OF EXAMINER**
(delete inappropriate paragraphs)

5.1 the thesis/major work should be classified as PASSED without further examination;

OR

~~5.2 the thesis/major work should be classified as PASSED, subject to corrections~~ being made to the Committee's satisfaction as outlined in the Examiner's Report;

OR

5.3 the candidate should be required to pass a written and/or oral examination in subjects relating to the thesis/major work before it is classified as PASSED;

OR

5.4 the thesis/major work should be classified as DEFERRED and the candidate should be permitted to resubmit the thesis in a revised form:

OR

~~5.5 the thesis should be classified as FAILED~~

Appendix A

Detailed confidential report of examiner to be made available to candidate. If necessary attach additional comments to Appendix A.

The thesis is an examination and demonstration of the role of personal writing and associated academic study in the rehabilitation of an adult who has suffered from sexual abuse during childhood. There is a sense in which the academic work clearly inspired and contributed to the personal writing, and also a sense in which the personal writing guided the direction of the reading and analysis of texts. This two-way nourishment between the elements of the work gives the thesis an unusual and most valuable place in the literature on the subject of writing and rehabilitation, with particular regard to women.

The candidate demonstrates throughout, in all parts of the thesis, including the Appendix (page 268 - 275), her consciousness of the broader contexts in which her work stands.

The bibliography ranges across disciplines; references are short and apt, and they demonstrate an understanding of the many-faceted nature of the subject matter. The range of references offers readers wide scope for further study of the topic. The quotations are well spaced through the text, allowing for an easy rhythm in the reading.

The personal writing (as well as the academic sections) betrays a sharp and critical appreciation not only of human psychic development, but of the history of the study of this development. The cost, to the writer, of the personal writing is high, but the rewards of self-realisation and recovery of a lost dignity are embraced with joy. This joy, appearing as it does in the context of an academic thesis, is a quality that sets the work apart.

The candidate has chosen to place the personal writing or novella at the beginning of the thesis. I think the structure of the thesis would be more effective if the novella were the final section of the work. I would also like to comment on a habit in the writing of the use of quotation marks to set words or expressions apart, for example, page 25, line 6 : 'heavy head' or 'vertigo'. This habit has the effect of weakening the writing. There is also a confusion in the use of single and double quotes, as on page 240, line 6, and page 242, last sentence. The titles of the two parts of the thesis: "From Mountains to Molehills" and "A Mirror Cracked" do not seem to me to serve the work particularly well, and I find the second part of each title to be more consistent with the work.

These are minor matters, and I do not suggest that the comments in the preceding paragraph should inhibit the awarding of the degree. This thesis is a valuable contribution to the literature on the therapeutic possibilities of writing, and it amplifies some of the complexity of the exercise of writing autobiography.

Signature of Examiner: _

Date _

VICTORIA UNIVERSITY OF TECHNOLOGY

RESEARCH DEGREE

EXAMINER'S REPORT

Degree of Master of Arts

1. Name of Candidate: Ms Kathryn Hegarty
2. Title of Thesis/Major Work: From Mountains to Molehills: Episodes from the life of a Survivor
3. Date of Submission: 26 June 1998
4. Name of Examiner:

5. **RECOMMENDATION OF EXAMINER**
(delete inappropriate paragraphs)

5.1 the thesis/major work should be classified as PASSED without further examination;

OR

5.2 the thesis/major work should be classified as PASSED, subject to corrections being made to the Committee's satisfaction as outlined in the Examiner's Report;

OR

5.3 the candidate should be required to pass a written and/or oral examination in subjects relating to the thesis/major work before it is classified as PASSED;

OR

5.4 the thesis/major work should be classified as DEFERRED and the candidate should be permitted to resubmit the thesis in a revised form;

OR

5.5 the thesis should be classified as FAILED

Appendix A

Detailed confidential report of examiner to be made available to candidate. If necessary attach additional comments to Appendix A.

Ms Hegarty certainly deserves her Masters degree: if you asked for a classification more specific that the Pass/Fail one, I would consider it to be in the Honours range. Reporting on it in the terms of a classical research 'thesis' is not entirely easy, since her enterprise represents a relatively new development in Australian higher degree submissions, the presentation of a substantial piece of original creative writing together with an exegetical framework which not only considers the genesis and methodology of the work, but also relates it to theoretical matters (in this particular case to feminist theory that engages with matters of psychology and sociology as well as literature).

In such cases, I believe that the major criteria of judgement must be the quality of the original creative work. Ms Hegarty's *From Mountains to Molehills: Episodes from the Life of a Survivor* sustains a high level of accomplishment, managing with considerable flair the difficulties of tone and voice that she discusses intelligently in her exegetical essay. In that essay she also perceptively identifies the centrality to the work of one of the grimmest episodes, 'Dark': I would have liked to hear more from her on the process of writing 'Sight', an equally powerful episode, and one profoundly connected thematically with 'Dark'. It should be added, however, that this is by no means a work of unalleviated darkness--there are effective flashes of sardonic wit, and some nicely observed passages of social comedy. I have only two reservations. One relates to the content of the 'novella' itself: I found 'Up', the final 'vignette' concerned with the narrator's entry into sexual life and her discovery of personal strength, less convincing than the rest--not because of theoretical expectations that a survivor of incest might have found sexual initiation more problematic, but because the writing here seems to me to lack the pressure of other episodes, and the extended use in a longish episode of such laconic, brief sentence structures risks flatness rather than the intensity or wit achieved elsewhere. If Ms Hegarty is sending the work out for publication (as well she might) I'd suggest one final revision of this section.

The other reservation is a minor theoretical one about her use of the term 'novella'. I suppose it may be acceptable simply as a definition of 'a short novel', but I wondered if Ms Hegarty had considered that Henry James, in settling the term into criticism, had defined the novella as requiring a high degree of formally focussed construction--the sort of form indeed that Ms Hegarty rejects as unsuited to the representation of the fragmentation of self that she sees as experienced particularly acutely by survivors of incest. If this were a PhD presentation, I would expect some discussion of this, but I think that it is not essential here, especially given the fact that Ms Hegarty's exegetical essay does defend her chosen episodic form by a substantial discussion of feminist theory that can be seen as meeting the expectation that she will show understanding of the relationship of her particular project to the wider intellectual context in which she has situated it.

This context requires her to demonstrate knowledge of the relationship of autobiographical writing and its possible narrative strategies to contemporary feminist and post-structuralist theories of selfhood and more particularly to demonstrate her acquaintance

(cont.)

Signature of Examiner:

Date 15/9/98

with current controversies about the 'reliability' of narratives of childhood sexual abuse. The range of her survey of relevant material is adequate, if occasionally I would have liked a little more exemplification--e.g. of the nature and extent of the 'hostility' which she asserts to have marked the reception of 'women's life writing'. The development of a relevant argument from her reading is generally satisfactory, although the chapter on Literary Theories of Autobiography suffered in clarity because of her method of proceeding from named critic to critic rather than from a clear initial indication of the shifts in ideas involved with the change of critic. The strength of her exegetical essay lies not so much in any highly original discussion of theory *per se*, as in its analysis of how such critical and scholarly reading provided a dynamic for her writing, solving problems of form and voice: it is a cheering demonstration of a fruitful rather than an inhibiting relationship between theory and creativity.

In recommending that Ms Hegarty be granted the Degree without further examination, I would, however, like to draw her attention to some minor faults in a generally well-presented thesis. She might care to remedy these before the work is placed on public record or sent out for possible publication:

p.6: Ray Misson's name is mis-spelled in the Dedication, as is that of Hedgley Dene gardens on pp. 12 and 13.
p.50: *pièce de resistance* must at least have its accent, even if italics are perhaps no longer strictly necessary.
p.54: 'envelopes' should be 'envelops'.
pp.72-73: If the phrase 'the Church of Clichés' is plural, then the possessive apostrophe is twice misplaced on p.72, while correct on p.73. (On p.110 it is missing altogether at line 7).
p.139: 'balanced' should be 'balance' in line 8.
p.151: 'can' should be 'can't' in penultimate line.
p.154: 'we' should be 'were' in line 4.
p.157: 'pejorative' and 'breath' are mis-spelled at foot of page.
p.164: 'til'' is incorrect at line 5. (Also on p.201)
p.167: Intrusive comma at line 13.
p.190: Missing possessive apostrophe in 'peoples registration numbers'.
p.239: In lines 6-7, the participle phrase is incorrectly attached.
p.253: Unclosed square bracket in fn 121.
p.258: Something appears omitted in the square brackets inserted into the first quotation.
p.265: 'am' omitted in penultimate line.
p.270: 'that' should be 'than' in line 1 of c).
p.272: Possessive apostrophe missing in 'ones demons'.
p.276: Italicising and spacing incorrect for the Angelou and Atwood entries.
p.278: Order incorrect in Grenville entry.
p.279: Missing colon in Lessing entry.
p.281: Kent Town should be two words in Stevens entry.
P.282: Full stops are missing after the initials in the entries for Wassil-Grimm and Wherret.

15/9/98