Negotiating Non-Violent Subjectivity in a Desocialised World: Narrative Explorations of Women’s Struggles against Self-Sacrifice.

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Abstract

The novel “Tracings of Absence” deals with the complex patterns of initiative and restraint that characterise the relationships between parents and children and the ghosts and shadows that haunt them as they negotiate this fraught terrain.

Deidra, a professional Australian woman in her late forties, is searching for her daughter, Jacqui, who went missing in Argentina three years earlier. Through her local contacts she strikes up a friendship with an English Catholic priest, Stephen. Both Deirdra and Stephen are grappling with histories of guilt and loss. Both are stuck in limbo, trying to find ways to move forward that don’t involve amputating their deepest feelings and desires.

As Deirdra searches through the crowded, vibrant and sometimes threatening landscape of Buenos Aires, she is also compelled to search through her own personal history, sifting memories surrounding her relationship with her daughter for potential clues about her daughter’s sudden disappearance. Throughout this search, she struggles with notions of motherhood and daughterhood, uncertainties surrounding identity and relationship and questions of faith and belief.

The novel addresses themes of yearning and absence and the ways in which we attempt to connect with each other across the chasms of our conflicting desires and faltering miscommunications. It also explores the human ties that lift us up and give us hope and the acts of merciful kindness that lead us to compassion for our own experience and for each other and to a renewed sense of human agency and responsiveness.

In the exegetical essay, “Negotiating Non-Violent Subjectivity: Narrative Explorations of Women’s Struggles against Self-Sacrifice”, I trace the ways in which the major themes of my novel emerged during the writing process, focusing on women’s struggles against self-condemnation and various forms of self-sacrifice. The essay explores critical theory relating to identity construction and patterns of social interaction, giving particular attention to the mimetic theory of René Girard. I cross-reference Girard’s work with the work of other philosophers, theologians, sociologists and feminist critics to both test and challenge some of his central assertions and to explore what began as unconscious artistic resistances to elements of his theory,
particularly as it related to women’s experience and certain questions and themes that were taking shape in my novel.

Having introduced the relevant theorists, the essay proceeds through a chronological tracing of the writing process that draws on autobiographical material as well as highlighting discoveries about the narrative craft. It concludes with a brief account of the way in which two other contemporary female novelists have dealt with similar themes to those explored in “Tracings of Absence” and arrives at conclusions about the possible narrative shape of women’s resistance to patterns of self-sacrifice.
Statement of Originality

Neither novel nor essay contains any material which has been accepted for the award of any degree or diploma in any university or other tertiary institution to Susan Holoubek and, to the best of my knowledge and belief, contains no material previously published or written by another person, except where due reference is made in the text.

I give consent to this copy of my thesis, when deposited in the University Library, being made available for loan and photocopying, subject to the provisions of the Copyright Act 1968.

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I Introduction

Most writers of fiction do not begin with an articulate thesis that they wish to explore. In many cases, it is the writing process itself that reveals to fiction writers their own preoccupations, the subliminal questions that are tugging at them. At some point in the first draft, particular themes may start to emerge but often it is not until subsequent drafts, when a certain amount of selective pruning has taken place, that these emergent themes assume any degree of clarity. By the end of the process, it is to be hoped that they shine forth with an aura of purposeful intent but it needs to be acknowledged that they are frequently products rather than precursors of the creative process and as much of a surprise to their authors as to any prospective readers.

When preparing her six Empson lectures for the University of Cambridge, Margaret Atwood asked a number of fellow novelists “what it felt like when they went into a novel” (xxii). She summarises their responses as follows:

Obstruction, obscurity, emptiness, disorientation, twilight, blackout, often combined with a struggle or path or journey – an inability to see one’s way forward, but a feeling that there was a way forward, and that the act of going forward would eventually bring about the conditions for vision – these were the common elements in many descriptions of the process of writing…Possibly, then, writing has to do with darkness, and a desire or perhaps a compulsion to enter it, and, with luck, to illuminate it, and to bring something back out to the light. (xxiii-xxiv)

This description resonates powerfully with my own experience of writing the novel that I am submitting as my major doctoral project. I began with certain questions and ostensible preoccupations but these shifted significantly throughout the writing process. The title of this exegetical essay reflects an arrival point but it also flags some significant points of illumination that I encountered along the way. In this essay I intend to trace the way in which the various thematic elements delineated in the title emerged during the course of the writing process. These thematic elements derived essentially from my own experience but were clarified by various theorists as well as the writing process itself. I will therefore discuss the relevance of the selected theorists with reference to autobiographical material through a chronological tracing of the writing process, which will also highlight learnings and discoveries about the
narrative craft. To begin, however, I would like to offer working definitions of some key terms.

I take the term “subjectivity” from the work of Melbourne sociologist, Kevin McDonald. In his text *Struggles for Subjectivity: Identity, Action and Youth Experience*, McDonald discusses his intent to trace “experiences of selfhood”, “struggles for identity”, “the nature of action and identity”, and “forms of social creativity and agency”. All of these descriptions offer insight into his use of the term “subjectivity”. Ultimately he cites a definition put forward by Alain Touraine:

> The subject is not a “soul” present in the body or in the spirit of individuals. It is the search, by the individuals themselves, for the conditions that will enable him or her to be the actor of her own history. What motivates this search is the suffering of being pulled apart and the loss of identity and individuation. (in McDonald 12)

When I first began my doctoral project I was interested in exploring the forms that this loss of identity and individuation take and the manner in which it is (or is not) resolved in women’s lives.

Touraine describes particular challenges for the contemporary subject. He argues that we are living in a time of deinstitutionalisation and desocialisation: the weakening of institutions and “the disappearance of roles, norms and values through which the world is constructed” (in McDonald 6). McDonald elaborates: “Dubet makes a similar point when he argues that personal experience is less held together by social institutions; instead, individuals find themselves in a social world made up of diverging and increasingly incoherent social logics from which each must construct a coherent and unified self” (6).

My own experience of these “increasingly incoherent social logics”, especially as reflected in the lack of consensus and conflicting expectations surrounding the experience of motherhood, were themes that surfaced as my project developed.

These two themes, subjectivity and “desocialisation”, were ones I had been pondering for a number of years but when I began my doctorate they had been eclipsed by my discovery of another French theorist, the literary critic and anthropologist, René Girard. I had come to Girard’s work through the writings of James Alison, a Catholic theologian, whose critique of atonement theory in the Christian tradition had fired my imagination and challenged my religious faith. Alison
observes in the forward to his book *The Joy of Being Wrong*, “Girard’s understanding of desire exploded like a depth charge. I felt as though I had been read like an open book – like the woman at the well of Samaria who went on to tell her compatriots: ‘Come, see a man who has told me all that I ever did’” (3). Reading Girard’s seminal text *Deceit, Desire and the Novel: Self and Other in Literary Structure* affected me in a similar way. This particular text threw a new light on experiences I had been grappling with in my life and in my creative writing since childhood.

Girard’s thesis, while based on a simple insight is, nevertheless, wide-ranging in its implications and difficult to encapsulate succinctly without causing misconceptions about his assertions. His central claims are based on the proposition that our capacity for high-level imitation (although he prefers the term *mimesis* as the term “imitation” connotes more deliberate emulation) is what makes us human. James Alison provides the following clarification to this point in *The Joy of Being Wrong*:

Mimesis…involves the less recognizable ways in which we are constituted as human beings by receiving physical being, a sense of being, gestures, memory, language, and consciousness through being drawn into imitation of others. Mimesis is therefore interior to the constitution of human beings and not merely something external added on to an already independent being. (12)

Integral to Girard’s mimetic theory is the assertion that our *desires* (beyond the satisfaction of instinctual biological needs) are also constitutionally imitative. Chris Fleming offers a succinct summary of this aspect of Girard’s theory: “To say that our desires are imitative or mimetic is to root them neither in their object nor in themselves but in a third party, the *model or mediator*, whose desire we imitate in the hope of resembling him or her” (10).

Girard goes on to claim that as we learn to reach for the same object (either material or symbolic) as our model/mediator we find ourselves engaged in *rivalry* with them. This tendency to define ourselves over and against each other sets up distinctive personal and social patterns of human interaction. Escalating envy and rivalry lead, almost inevitably, to conflict and violence.

Building on this claim, Girard posits that the human conception of “the sacred” emerged out of the experiences and events which deflected and channelled this violence away from the community as a whole, albeit only temporarily. He argues that
to avoid the horrifying prospect of all against all, archaic communities spontaneously redirected the escalating violence of ongoing mimetic rivalry onto a scapegoat – an individual or group whom everyone could be against. The individual or group was killed or expelled and peace descended. His proposition is that the first cultural act was a lynching, that murder is at the foundation of human civilization, culture and linguistic development. Subsequently, the victim of this lynching was identified as the source of the newfound peace and frequently deified. It is this understanding that is re-enacted through religious ritual as a prophylactic and early cure for future emergences of mimetic violence. Thus, he posits that, “violence is the heart and secret soul of the sacred” (Violence 31).

I found Girard’s mimetic theory extraordinarily compelling. It seemed to makes sense of much of my own experience as well as many social behaviours that I had observed over the years. Like James Alison, I was particularly fascinated by the dynamic of human mimesis he described as well as his assertion that much of our “selfhood” is defined “over and against” the social other\(^1\) – a defining feature of “subjectivity” that tends, almost inexorably to violence, a violence that, in its extreme forms, is played out through lynching and sacrifice.

While frequently projected outward onto a despised or marginal “other”, the sacrificial logic can also assume the form of “self-sacrifice”. In Sacrificed Lives: Kristeva on Women and Violence, a text which draws parallels between Julia Kristeva’s insights into sacrifice and those of René Girard, Martha Reineke develops this theme of self-sacrifice with particular reference to women’s experience in patriarchal culture. As well as asking “Why are women so often the recipients of violent gestures that bruise and sometimes kill?” (2), Reineke suggests that “mimetic violence among women, under circumstances of intense elaboration, is more likely to be implosive and suicidal” (91).

\(^1\) Girard’s use of the term “the other” appears to derive from French psychoanalytical discourses. In his early work, he designates the “Other” with a capital “O”, which suggests an allusion to Jacques Lacan’s “symbolic” Other or “grande-autre” – that which is conceptualised as “outside” the self and embodied in particular subjects on whose gaze we depend for our sense of identity. Girard, however, seems to use the term more loosely. In his literary critiques the “other” is often a specific human other but carries symbolic weight by virtue of the meaning that is invested in him/her by the protagonist. He states “The other, is anyone, literally, who happens to cross the hero’s path or stands in his way or simply look at him with real or imagined irony … the other is quintessentially the mimetic obstacle” (Double Business 78). In his later works, he refers more frequently to “the other person”. In more recent texts he begins to use the more theological term “neighbour”.
Reineke’s work raised a series of new questions for me about the mimetic impulse underlying female patterns of self-sacrifice and the various ways in which these patterns of self-sacrifice are manifested in women’s construction of identity and selfhood. These questions also began to find expression in the narrative I was developing.

Another influential insight came from a more dismissive critic of Girard. Chris Shea rejects the determinism of Girard’s thesis and his pessimistic view of human agency. She parodies this determinism in the following summary:

In the claustrophobic confines of the cycle of mimetic violence:
1. all desire leads to conflict …
2. no man has friends, neighbours, kin or allies who might attempt to halt his victimization …
3. no one ever learns from experience …
4. laws which represent the collective wisdom of centuries of humanity are nonetheless powerless to solve the problem of mimetic violence, and all people are, in any case, eager to violate those laws which do attempt, however futilely, to control violence. (260)

Her comments prompted me to start asking myself questions about patterns of resistance to self-sacrifice and models of overcoming. How do women engage in more liberating and empowering constructions of selfhood and what experiences nourish that process?

While the work of social theorists threw new light on significant experiences that I was trying to express in my writing, the work of other novelists was also critical. I read widely to ascertain not only how other writers had handled the technical challenges of similarly themed narratives but also to learn from the insights they brought to their explorations. Some works were particularly influential: Virginia Woolf’s To the Lighthouse, Margaret Atwood’s Cat’s Eye, Kate Grenville’s The Idea of Perfection, Anne Bartlett’s Knitting, J.M. Coetzee’s Disgrace, Carol Shields’ Unless, Amy Witting’s Isobel on the Way to the Corner Shop and Lionel Shriver’s We Need to Talk about Kevin. Towards the end of this essay I will focus on two of these novels as part of a brief examination of the ways in which other works of fiction have influenced and informed my own narrative reflections and explorations.
I will begin, however, by detailing the chronological unfolding of the project, referring in each section to some of the autobiographical influences underlying my work, elaborating the reasons for my interest in the theorists I have named and exploring some of the technical challenges that arose in the process of translating personal experience and social theory into an extended work of fiction.

II “Katie’s” story

In my initial application to the doctoral programme, I submitted the beginnings of a ficto-critical biography on which I had been working for several months. The subject was a work colleague I had come to know over the course of the previous year. “Katie” is a white South African who had recently migrated to Australia. Casual questioning in the tearoom one morning brought to light the tragic story of her husband’s death. He had been car-jacked, beaten and raped by a gang from one of the townships in Cape Town and had committed suicide several weeks later. I was enormously moved by this story as well as by Katie’s calm courage as she discussed the ways in which she had come to terms with her husband’s death. She continued to share aspects of her life story with me over subsequent weeks.

We discovered early on that we shared an interest in long distance running. Katie had taken up running in her late 30s, after her second child was born, competing in ultradistance races like the gruelling 89km South African Comrades marathon. We spoke at length about the training in endurance and the capacity to push through pain barriers that one learns from such endeavours. And there had been much pain in Katie’s life to “push through”. She had been born to warring, alcoholic parents and had lived in extremely impoverished circumstances for much of her childhood. At one point her family lived in a car under a bridge in Johannesburg. When her parents died she went to live with a wealthy aunt in Cape Town. While this represented a definite improvement in her material circumstances she struggled to fit into her new surroundings and was at pains to conceal her lowly origins, her lack of education and her rough accent from her peers in the upper class boarding school that she attended. When she left school she enrolled to study nursing, dropped out before graduating, became engaged to an accountant, broke off the engagement to elope with a touring
Scottish soccer player (who turned out to be a violent drunk), lived in Australia briefly when her husband was recruited to a Canberra soccer side, returned to South Africa when the marriage fell apart, lived the party life in Cape Town for a number of years and eventually settled down happily with her second husband until his tragic death some five years after they were married. The account of how she migrated to Australia and won the right to permanent residency is similarly dramatic. It seemed like a story begging to be told and Katie was eager to tell it.

I began to tape record her anecdotes and ask more detailed questions about the events of her life. I transcribed thousands of words of material and started to explore ways of putting it together. Unfortunately, I did not clarify with Katie the way in which I intended to use her story. She believed I wanted to compile a verbatim transcription of the events of her life, whereas I was more interested in using the material in a ficto-critical manner: bolstering it with imaginative detail and weaving my own commentary and personal reflections throughout the text. Essentially, I envisaged the work as being held together by the account of our evolving friendship, with Katie’s story functioning as one layer in a multi-layered narrative centring on women’s struggles and triumphs and the centrality of storytelling to the way in which we construct ourselves in relationship with others.

When I showed Katie the drafts, however, she became quite angry. She was taken aback by the intrusion of my voice, offended by my commentary on her life and perplexed about the presence of anecdotes and stories from my life. I realised at this point that the project was not going to work. The ethical considerations alone made it impossible to proceed. Even though Katie subsequently backed away from her remarks and told me that I could do what I liked with the material, I did not want to exploit the details of her life in a way that was potentially unacceptable to her.

All this seems a long time ago. In fact, my main recollection of the significance of this experience was that it left me high and dry without a defined project within the first six months of beginning my doctorate and that 20,000 words of well developed material had to be discarded. What it suggests to me now, looking back, is that the seeds of my subsequent preoccupations were already present in my enthusiasm for this story.

As I describe it now, my interest seems consistent with my thesis proposal but I had not explicated it for myself in these terms at the time. I was fascinated not only by the circumstances of Katie’s life, but also by the whole chaotic violence of South
African society. Never having been personally exposed to overt physical violence, I was deeply curious about how people respond to such incidents. I admired her resilience and her fortitude and I wanted to know how she survived, how she coped. I wanted to know about the dilemmas and the decisions that she had to make and I wanted to know how she made sense of what had happened to her, what she believed in, what sustained her.

I think it is also true to say, even though I would not have phrased it this way at the time, that I was drawn to Katie because she seemed to me to have resisted the compulsion to self-sacrifice. My reading of her was that she was a risk-taker and a survivor. She struck out on her own and she made strongly pragmatic choices about what was necessary to advance her own prospects. I don’t believe this was necessarily at the expense of other people, although sometimes others suffered as a result of the choices she made. As I characterised it to myself at the time, “she fitted her own oxygen mask first”. She attended to her own needs and I admired the freedom of spirit that allowed her to do so. I suspect, however, that one of the things she recoiled from in reading what I had written about her, was my depiction of this very trait. She had the capacity to reject the female compulsion to self-sacrifice but she did not like seeing it documented. She was still susceptible to needing different things said about her.

III  Red Fruits and Runaway Daughters

Finding myself without a clearly defined project on which to continue working, I sought out the advice of my supervisor, Nick Jose. He suggested two possible ways of resolving the dilemma. The first was to revisit the themes of my Masters project and see if there were any clues there about what sort of project I might be interested in picking up. The second was an inquiry about my interest in Girardian theory and the ways in which I might be able to use this. I will deal with each of these suggestions separately.

I enrolled in the Masters degree in Creative Writing at the University of Adelaide in the same year Tom Shapcott was appointed to launch the course. One of the early writing exercises Tom set for us was the tactile examination of a bag of
plums and a spontaneous written response to them, drawing on “five senses” detail as well as feelings and associations. Brainstorming on a theme of “red fruits” led me to pomegranates, which recalled the Greek myth of Persephone, trapped in the underworld by the consumption of seven seeds from this red fruit of the dead. It has only occurred to me in the process of compiling the notes for this exegetical essay, that this is the point at which my interest in the theme of missing daughters first began to stir.

The Masters project that evolved from my own musings on this theme was somewhat tangential. I chose to focus on a ficto-critical biography of my paternal grandmother and the elements of the story that drew me to her life story are now instantly recognisable as recurring preoccupations, but they weren’t so at the time.

My grandmother was born to a Scottish Protestant father and an Irish Catholic mother in Brisbane at the turn of the last century. In the mid 1920s she eloped with a Prussian Jew (my grandfather) who had deserted his first wife, an elderly widow from country Victoria. My grandfather was a colourful character: a runner, a gambler, a conman, a street performer. The pair went missing for ten years, resurfacing only after my grandfather’s first wife had sued for divorce, leaving them free to marry and legitimise the three children they had produced in the meantime. During this period of time nobody else in the family knew what had happened to them. My grandmother’s brother even went to view the body of the “Pyjama Girl” preserved in formaldehyde at Police Headquarters in Sydney to see if he could identify his missing sister.

Not long after my grandparents returned to Brisbane, my grandfather enlisted in the army and was deployed in Papua New Guinea, but he contracted malaria in the first two weeks of active service and was shipped home to die. My grandmother, impoverished and in chronic ill health, died two years later after she returned with her children to Sydney. My father, her youngest child, was nine years old at the time.

I am not convinced of the success of the story that I eventually produced for my Masters degree. It remains at what I believe to be a first draft stage, a plethora of interesting but competing strands. I don’t think I ever explicated my essential preoccupation, which, again, was my fascination with a woman who had managed to resist, if only for a short time, the pressure to conform to patterns of self-effacing servitude. I was distracted by the glamorous antics of my grandfather, by my pity for my father and what he endured in the wake of his parents’ deaths, by the way in which elements of his suffering have been passed down to his children, albeit unconsciously
and unintentionally and these constant shifts in focus kept blurring the essential intent of the narrative.

In many ways this story was also attempting to explore selfhood, or subjectivity, the desire to know how and why we are constituted. Family stories are frequently evoked in this process. McDonald, after François Dubet, notes that one of the “terrains” of action where modern subjects attempt to construct an account of themselves is a social terrain where we negotiate an experience of “us”, of belonging, of community (21). The social constitution of the individual is also a central assertion in Charles Taylor’s comprehensive and detailed examination of the emergence of modern selfhood, *Sources of the Self*.

One is a self only among other selves. A self can never be described without reference to those who surround it...I define who I am by defining where I speak from, in the family tree, in social space, in the geography of social statuses and functions, in my intimate relations with the ones I love, and also crucially in the space of moral and spiritual orientation within which my most important defining relations are lived out. (35)

Psychologists who have explored the implications and applications of Girard’s mimetic theory of desire have coined the term “interdividuality” to describe the psychological implications of this social constitution of the self. Alison explains this term in *The Joy of Being Wrong*:

The “me” is radically dependent on the desires whose imitation formed it. This means that there is no “real me” at the bottom of it all, when I’ve scraped away all the things that I’ve learned, all the influences I’ve undergone. Psychology is what goes on between people, not, in the first place, any particular individual. (31)

Girard is not a psychologist and therefore does not focus much attention on the psychosocial dynamics of family life. He has, however, given a good deal of attention to Freud’s Oedipal theory, as a way of illustrating the dynamics of mimetic desire. He posits that it is the son’s desire to be like the father that precedes any latent desire for the mother. The son desires the mother because this is what his father, his model, desires. Girard goes on to trace the implications of this in the modern era, the era in which the father becomes an obstacle or a rival to the son, thus setting up the double bind that he argues “might be said to form the basis of all human relationships”
This double bind derives from the model’s mixed messages, the suggestion to “be like me”, and the responses that communicate, “do not be like me” when the “disciple” starts to impinge on the model’s metaphysical or actual territory.

In Western Society, the father had already become the model by the patriarchal era. In order for the double bind to operate, he had also to become the obstacle. And the father can only become an obstacle when the diminution of his paternal authority has brought him into direct confrontation with his son, obliging him to occupy the same sphere. (Violence 188)

Touraine’s insight into desocialisation seems relevant here. As social accord about traditional roles and responsibilities breaks down, human desire, according to Girard, previously contained by such channels, starts to overflow its banks and sow discord in more intimate spheres.

McDonald, citing the work of Pierre Jeammet, in a section of his book that explores adolescent eating disorders, provides an interesting cross-reference to this aspect of Girard’s thesis:

We have witnessed the weakening of what is forbidden and of inter-generational barriers, the decline of consensus regarding limits and inter-generational barriers. This consensus played the role of a third party, mediating the desire of parents, such that now it is increasingly up to parents alone to put forward limits to adolescents. This reinforces the relationship of complicity between them, these limits being increasingly imposed much more in terms of the desires of each than in terms of relationships to any external source or reference. (in McDonald 175)

Back in 1998 I wasn’t exploring the dynamics of mimetic desire in tracing the life stories of my grandmother and my father. I was asking questions about formative influences and the ways in which these can be played out in families over several generations. It was my later reading of Girard that gave me a framework for making sense of these things.

One of the criticisms of Girard’s work is that he gives no consideration to the place of mothers in familial patterns of mimetic desire. Marianne Hirsch makes an extremely interesting point regarding the way in which mothers can function as negative role models in her text The Mother Daughter Plot: Narrative, Psychoanalysis, Feminism. She posits that within the confines of patriarchy, “The
fantasy that controls the female family romance is the desire for the heroine’s singularity based on dis-identification from the fate of other women, especially mothers” (10). She goes on to elaborate: “Women writers’ attempts to imagine lives for their heroines that will be different from their mothers’ make it imperative that the mother be silent or absent in their texts…instead they ally themselves with fathers and brothers” (34).

This is an intriguing claim when lined up against Girardian theory. Are ambitious women more likely to take fathers as role models and therefore experience the dynamic of mimetic rivalry in relation to their fathers? Are they then inclined to scapegoat their mothers, relegating them to the position of the silenced other?

When I began work on my novel, I thought that I was tracing the story of my relationship with my father and my conscious and unconscious efforts from early childhood to emulate his tastes, opinions and achievements. This is where Girard’s mimetic theory resonated most powerfully within my own personal history. I wanted to explore this paternal influence, especially as it related to the protagonist’s maternal behaviours, and vestiges of this preoccupation remain in the final draft of the novel. The process of writing and the feedback from readers, however, revealed something very different to me in the work I was developing. The majority view was that this was a story about mothers and daughters and that was where I should remain more consistently focused.

IV  Girardian Theory and a Volume of Short Stories

My supervisor’s second suggestion, when I was still searching around for ideas in the wake of the collapse of my first proposal, was to tease out my interest in Girard to see if it could give me any clues about the sort of creative writing project I might be interested in pursuing. In this section of the exegetical essay I would like to expand a little on Girard’s thesis and the way in which it helped me to move forward with my project, and to supplement this with a consideration of the aspects of my own life that made me particularly receptive to Girard’s propositions.
**External and Internal Mediation**

Girard distinguishes between two types of mediated desire: *external* mediation and *internal* mediation. *External* mediation defines the relationship between the desiring subject and his or her model when the distance (geographical, historical, spiritual or social) is so great as to discourage any real rivalry. Kings, gods, fictional heroes and celebrities are examples of models who may trigger external mediation. *Internal* mediation occurs when there is no such distance between the subject and the model and leads, almost inevitably, to *conflictual mimesis*.

Girard argues that intensifying patterns of internal mediation are a defining characteristic of the modern and he links this to the collapse of hierarchies and social distinctions that, in former times, served to constrain and limit people’s interactions as well as their desires. Drawing on literary sources such as Dostoevsky’s *Notes from Underground* and *The Possessed*, he traces the progress of internal mediation in the modern era, referring to the “multiplication” of models and the subsequent fragmentation of the modern self:

> the man from the underground is often torn between several simultaneous mediations. He is a different person every moment of his existence and for everyone he is with…as the mediator draws nearer, unity is broken up into multiplicity…the demon of the possessed is called legion and he takes refuge in a herd of swine. He is both one and many. This atomisation of the personality is the final stage of internal mediation…and it is in *internal* mediation that the profoundest meaning of the *modern* is found. (*Deceit* 91-92)

The fragmentation of identity and the “atomisation of the personality” is a recurring theme in modern and especially post-modern literature. Even before I encountered Girard I had begun to explore personal experiences of this in my own journal writing:

> I can say exactly what you want to hear, make myself into anything you want me to be – although lately the script feels tedious and I am even boring myself with the caricatures I adopt. But I can’t stop. I can’t stop because underneath all of these old moth-eaten roles I don’t think I exist anymore. Underneath the crusted-on accretions, the borrowed gestures and expressions and attitudes and assertions, there is only, well, a kind of perplexed and anxious resentment. And underneath all of that, an absence. An absence of anything in particular…
Girard’s insight into the mimetic nature of this experience of personal fragmentation resonated strongly with my own musings on the theme and it was something I decided that I wanted to continue to explore in my doctoral project.

**Deviated Transcendency**

I have already referred to Girard’s assertion that the “objects” reached for in the pattern of mimetic rivalry are not merely material. Indeed, the very question of the subject’s *being* is often at stake:

> Once his basic needs are satisfied (indeed sometimes even before), man is subject to intense desires, though he may not know precisely for what. The reason is that he desires *being*, something he himself lacks and which some other person seems to possess. The subject thus looks to that other person to inform him of what he should desire in order to acquire that being. (*Violence* 146)

*Deviated transcendency* is the term Girard uses to describe the process whereby the subject’s yearning for a sense of being is diverted from a transcendent deity to a more proximous other:

> God is dead, man must take his place...The modern “glad tidings” are heard by everyone. The more deeply it is engraved in our hearts the more violent is the contrast between this marvellous promise and the brutal disappointment inflicted by experience...Each individual discovers in the solitude of his consciousness that the promise is false but no one is able to universalise his experience. The promise remains true for Others. Each one believes that he alone is excluded from the divine inheritance and takes pains to hide this misfortune. (*Deceit* 56-57)

Our profound sensitivity to the gaze of the other, the ways in which we strive to emulate our neighbours, the strong susceptibility of young (and older) people to peer group conformity, the wide-spread cult of celebrity-worship – all of these things seem to me to support Girard’s assertion that we look towards the social other for a sense of being, for clues about what to desire and aspire to. They are also compulsions that seem to leave many of us feeling deeply dissatisfied with our lot, diminished by constant comparisons in which we are always found wanting.
This experience of not being good enough is one I have heard women my age discuss at length. Judith Warner took on this theme in her text, *Perfect Madness: Motherhood in the Age of Anxiety*, in which she explores the “demon images of perfect motherhood” (44). She quotes women who tell her, “*I feel I cannot love enough or in the right way or in the right amounts*” (40). This cry of widespread feminine anguish was also something that I felt moved to explore in my writing.

Girard implies that a less conflictual or competitive sense of being might be discovered through diverting our mimetic instincts from our neighbour to a transcendent deity, (as in the “imitation of Christ”). This was, however, something that I began to question quite strongly as my fictional explorations developed. I will return to this point later in this essay.

*Sacrifice and Scapegoats*

Girard proposes that archaic communities deflected the escalating violence triggered by mimetic desire onto particular individuals or groups (scapegoats). Guilt for the problems of the community was loaded on to a victim or victims who were expelled or sacrificed, thus quelling, temporarily, the flow of violent reprisals. By providing a common focus for everyone’s fear and anger, the victim/s achieved atonement, “at-one-ment”, for the whole community. Girard’s most famous text, *Violence and the Sacred*, is devoted to this anthropological thesis. Exploring the mechanisms and manifestation of social violence has become one of his most enduring concerns. Dwelling on this aspect of his work is beyond the scope of this essay but it is necessary to highlight several points of particular pertinence to my own research.

In *Violence and the Sacred* Girard argues that, in modern societies, the judiciary functions as a circuit breaker for the cycle of mimetic violence: “The system does not suppress vengeance; rather it effectively limits it to a single act of reprisal, enacted by a sovereign authority specialising in this particular function” (15). So, in other words, we have not relinquished the old sacrificial strategies, merely delegated them to an independent authority. This is not to deny, of course, that an independent judiciary represents a distinct improvement on blood feuds and virgin sacrifice but it is important to note the implication: we have not transcended the old fears and well-practised solutions.
William Johnsen in *Violence and Modernism* posits the new sites where we might expect to see the old mechanisms re-emerging in different forms:

In the modern period, we see the genetic mechanism for the origin of primitive [sacrificial or scapegoating] ritual elaborated by Girard, starting itself up in all the places where the judicial system is inoperative or ineffective, where it doesn’t “apply”: private, domestic, or social interactions short of illegal behaviour, and global relations where no transcendent judicial system has the last word. (x)

The escalation of international terrorism is an obvious example of violence breaking out beyond the jurisdiction of national boundaries but what is going on in those other sites – our “private, domestic, or social interactions”? James Alison picks up this question:

Girard considers desire to be especially present in the modern world, for we live in the midst of the collapse of social prohibitions and are comparatively bereft of public sacrificial resolutions. The social institutions, rights and prohibitions which protected us from each other’s violence no longer do so effectively. We are left bearing in our own desire vis-à-vis each other – meaning in all our relationships both intimate and public – all the complications of violence, rejection and competition which now have no public resolution. Some find this lack of public resolutions too hard to bear and come to crystallise in their own lives a visible sacrificial resolution to this desire: addiction, obsession, madness, and psychotic behaviour are different in degree, not kind, from what drives us all. (Joy 14)

In the light of these reflections then, I began to ask myself: if it is indeed the case, if sacrificial mechanisms continue to be enacted in uncontrolled sites, what are the implications of this for our most intimate interpersonal relationships? What are the implications for inter-generational relationships in a world where these relationships are no longer regulated by symbolic distance? Girard argues that we choose our scapegoats from those who are vulnerable and ready-to-hand. What does this mean for the relationships between parents and children in the modern world? If our automatic response in defining ourselves over/against the other is to seek out a victim – someone who can atone for the pain of our thwarted struggles for ascendancy – who is that victim? And in what ways do we victimise?

After abandoning the ficto-critical biography project with which I had applied to start my doctorate, I decided to begin work on a volume of short stories, based on
some of the Girardian themes and questions that I was interested in exploring. Over the next twelve months I produced ten short stories dealing with themes of mimesis, rivalry, and scapegoating. I don’t believe that they were particularly good short stories. Janet Burroway observes in *The Art of Narrative Fiction* that “If a writer sets out to write a story to illustrate an idea, the fiction will almost inevitably be thin” (309-310) and I suspect that my stories suffered from this disease. There was a superior, didactic tone about many of them that irritated me. They were, however, useful warm-ups – sites of “practice and rote repetition”, processes that Madison Smartt Bell believes are the prerequisite for the unconscious deployment of craft (21). These stories, long since discarded, were based on some of the life experiences described below. I believe these experiences also throw some light on my personal resonances with Girard’s work as well as the major themes of my creative project.

V Autobiographical reflection: personal resonances with Girardian theory

*Childhood*

One of the earliest memories I retain is of my first day at kindergarten. This kindergarten memory is smudgy: I was hovering close to my mother. The curtains were drawn and the room was dark. Children were sitting on the floor in front of a large television set, watching an animation of “Goldilocks and the Three Bears”. The opening theme from Tchaikowsky’s “Dance of the Sugar Plum Fairy” was accompanying Goldilocks’ passage through the gloomy wood. I noticed shelves stuffed with a wonderful array of books in the far corner of the room and experienced a sudden surge of joy. Breaking away from my mother, I ran over to look at them. And then I remember arms reaching down to me – no face – a book being removed from my eager hands and an instruction repeated several times, because my disappointment must have manifested as incomprehension: I was not allowed to read a book until I had completed a jigsaw puzzle. Jigsaw first, then book. Books were only
allowed after puzzles. I did not like jigsaw puzzles. But the former had to be endured before the latter was permitted.

I learnt to read at a very young age and in the manner of many avid readers, including those famous fictional exemplars, Quixote and Bovary, probably spent far too much time lost in fantasy worlds. Writers and artists, Girard claims, are often “hypermimetic” (Adams, *Conversation* 25), obsessed as they are with observation and representation. At any rate, from as far back as I can remember, I imagined myself into the books I was reading, acting out the dilemmas of the protagonists, copying their speech patterns, emulating their values and opinions. I, literally, constructed my emerging identity out of “texts”.

But my propensity for imitation was not confined to books. My mother says she could always tell which children I had been playing with in the multicultural streets where we lived, by the accents I came home with. And as I grew older I always seemed to have some older hero figure to whom I was attached: a child several years older than myself with a particular accomplishment I coveted – playing the piano or riding a horse – a beloved teacher, nun, priest, missionary worker, social activist. I have fashioned myself according to some significant social “other” for as long as I can remember.

Am I only describing a personal eccentricity? This particular manifestation of mimetic desire is perhaps not universal but I believe the same tendency was being played out in different ways by most of the people around me. While they may not have had the same fixed intensity on particular role models, some of my peers turned their “mimetic” attentions to pop stars or sporting heroes. Many were devoted to copying fashion and acceptable images of femininity. Others sought “being” and desirability in the eyes of an endless series of boyfriends. We were all, more or less obsessed, in one way or another, with being someone else.

And what of the scapegoating thesis? The more I dwell on this aspect of Girard’s thesis, the more credible it seems. One does not have to reflect too long to identify multiple instances of such behaviour in a wide variety of social contexts.

Because of my father’s army career, my family travelled extensively when I was young. As well as three years in the UK, we lived in virtually every capital city of Australia as well as several smaller towns: the desert town of Woomera and a year in Queenscliff on the Victorian coast. During this period of travel, I attended a total of eight different schools. In many ways this was a privileged opportunity and there were
aspects of the travelling that I enjoyed. The repeated experience of being a stranger in
an unfamiliar milieu, of being the “new kid” in the class was, however, something
with which I always struggled and something that heightened my sensitivity to the
position of the outsider. I do not wish to overstate this. For me, this experience of
foreignness was always transitory – a situation that I approached in the manner of a
problem to be solved, an obstacle to be overcome. I did not bear the permanent marks
of stigma with which many other children had to contend: race, colour, disability,
signs of poverty and disadvantage, but I learnt to read the power dynamics of human
interaction through repeated exposure, in a variety of situations, to recurring patterns
of inclusion and exclusion.

I developed a finely tuned capacity to assess groups and to identify quite
quickly where they all stood in relationship to one another in the pecking order. I
learnt to pick fellow marginals and form temporary alliances with these in my
progress toward wider social acceptance. There is no more tempting target than a lone
being separated from the pack. I knew, at first hand, the sudden singeing flares of
contempt that are directed at loners, but I also knew that it was not necessarily
personal because I had seen the pattern repeated so many times. Groups derive their
identity over and against other individuals and groups. This was clear to me from a
very early age and, once I was accepted into a group, I copied these strategies myself
– with probably even more fervour than my peers. Having always had some relatively
recent experience of being at the bottom of the heap, I was more vigorously motivated
not to slip back there. But my own experiences also led to a strong identification with
the newly ostracised victims and, while I was not prepared to go out on a limb for
them, I was never able to completely relinquish my sense of shame at being too
cowardly to do so.

**Working Life**

As an adult, I have spent nearly twenty years working in secondary schools. Even
from the position of power afforded me as a teacher, I cannot watch these social
dynamics being enacted over and over again without acute discomfort. The
playground is humanity writ large, without any of the concealment strategies we learn
as we age. While it may be easier to forget our strong, almost instinctive pull toward
scapegoating when we work in more civilized adult environments, it is impossible to forget when you spend much time in schools.

But, while the scapegoating mechanism may be subtler in other environments, it is, nonetheless, present. When I left school I completed one year of an Arts degree then deferred my studies to work for three years as the national coordinator of a tertiary student network sponsored by the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference. We were a broad affiliation of campus-based groups with a common agenda to examine situations of injustice, both locally and internationally, and to develop a range of practical responses to these. We had missed the large-scale student activism of the early 1970s but there were small enclaves of us left to “fight the good fight” and we Catholics had the interesting experience of being wooed (in some quarters) by the communist remnants of the Australian Union of Students in order to prop up their flagging numbers in the last days of radical student unionism.

And much good was achieved. At an international level we had members involved with the anti-colonial struggle in Zimbabwe, members who faced the firing squads in Liberia as a result of their defiance of Samuel Doe’s suppression of oppositional movements and activities, students who “disappeared” in Guatemala and El Salvador because they refused to abandon their commitment to relief work in poor communities, students in Poland who stood alongside workers in the Solidarity movement, students fighting for workers’ right to unionise under the oppressive regime of Lee Kuan Yew in Singapore.

In Australia, our actions were more modest. We focused on attempts to get to know newcomers on campus and build a sense of community in our classes and the broader student milieu. We got involved with various social campaigns and dabbled in campus politics. Various education issues were championed at different levels. Some students took on projects to support particular individuals who found themselves penalised unfairly by the university system. We derived a lot of energy from supporting the causes of our members in other countries via boycotts, letter-writing campaigns and lobbying of government ministers.

But three years down the track I began to notice some old themes playing behind our heroic foregrounded melodies. I noticed that we were not very adept at including new members within our leadership structure. We tended to look down our noses at their (relative) youth and naiveté: they had not shared our history; they were not truly “one of us”. In addition, when we should have been building solidarity with
like-minded groups we seemed to be forever finding fault with petty differences of orientation and methodology. We had fallen in love with our own sense of superiority and radical purity of intention. We were the lone defenders of the poor and oppressed – the holders of the sacred vision. And it had given us a great Manichean basis from which we could despise the “evil” in our “enemies”. Years later, when I read the following passage from Girard, the memory of these behaviours was still sufficiently strong to make me squirm:

We dehumanise every desire whose harmful consequences we perceive in order not to recognise our own image, or caricature, of our own desires (Deceit 183)… The masochist turns this hatred into a duty and condemns anyone who does not hate along with him… All the values of Christian morality can be found in masochism but their hierarchy is inverted. Compassion is never a principle but a result. The principle is hatred of the triumphant wicked. Good is loved in order that Evil is hated more. The oppressed are defended for the sake of overwhelming the oppressors. (188-189)

**Motherhood**

After graduating from university, I married, worked as a secondary school teacher, took time off intermittently to have three children, tried to maintain a fledgling interest in writing. Mostly this took the form of journaling, recording the experiences and reflections of my daily life. Looking back on these writings, I notice themes of irritation, nostalgia and yearning and the struggle to hold together a fractured life of paid work, domestic responsibility, child-rearing and personal creativity. My own life at the time felt burdensome and guilt-laden. While my oldest son was at school I used to plant my 18-month-old daughter and baby son on the floor with a mound of toys and type up my writing assignments in between nappies and feeds, fights and fatigue, bored disgruntlement and darting interventions to prevent dangerous explorations.

I have already referred to the work of François Dubet, familiar to me through my reading of Kevin McDonald’s text *Struggles for Subjectivity*. It is pertinent at this point to elaborate on it further.

Dubet identifies three terrains in which the modern subject must negotiate a sense of successful self: 1. the terrain of community life: the attempt to construct an experience of belonging through enacting shared values and beliefs, 2. the terrain where we negotiate networks of constraint and opportunity: the domains in which we
act to represent our financial, work, legal or political interests, 3. the terrain of personal and social creativity: “the field of action where [social] actors construct an image of ourselves in terms of freedom or dignity” (McDonald 21).

Dubet argues that negotiating these three terrains frequently imposes competing logics on the social actor so that it becomes increasingly difficult to achieve a coherent sense of self. For example, if one is fulfilling the requirements of the mothering “contract”, one is frequently violating the terms of one’s work contract. One may have occasion to develop personal creativity and agency but this will frequently occur at the expense of one’s familial obligations. Sometimes successful involvement in the workplace is purchased at the price of nagging guilt about the neglect of one’s children or the loss of one’s own personal integrity and deepest hopes and dreams. For women, in particular, the clashing demands can lead to a deep and prolonged experience of guilt and failure on many fronts. The temptation towards multiple forms of self-condemnation and atonement is very strong in such situations, the pull towards self-sacrifice almost irresistible.

In Girard’s writings, the term “sacrifice” is used to characterise a form of social behaviour in which, in a situation of escalating and increasingly vengeful mimetic rivalry, a mob converges upon a victim whose death restores peace and unanimity. While primitive forms of sacrifice have often been explained as propitiary acts towards a vengeful or violent deity, Girard argues that in reality, they function as acts of substitutionary violence in which the victim becomes a scapegoat for the escalating mimetic violence taking place in the community at large. This mechanism of deflecting escalating social violence is, however, no longer effective. William Johnsen explains why in his text Violence and Modernism:

The generative [scapegoating] mechanism can no longer deliver peace through a completed polarization on a single victim because it runs into or triggers the judicial system or, more alarmingly, it stalls in crisis, in the middle, because the scapegoat mechanism is so well understood in the modern period that we recognise what Girard calls the “stereotypes” of persecution, and side with the victim. (x-xi)

He also argues, after Girard, that “the period identity of the modern is its passionate attention to victims” (xi) but that:
Apart from a positive ethics and a perhaps neutral intellectual concern, this preoccupation with victims can also degrade into the perverse belief that the status of victim itself guarantees superiority of being in comparison with those it accuses of persecution. Thus modern writers consider not only the remarkable re-emergence of sacrifice as the focus of a community, but the curious willingness of its victims to embrace self-sacrifice. (xi)

Johnsen goes on to a detailed analysis of the works of Joyce, Ibsen and Woolf using this frame of reference. “Self-sacrifice” in Johnsen’s terms, is frequently a hypocritical strategy via which people assert their moral superiority over their rivals. Girard also invokes the term “sacrifice” in a negative sense although he admits in a 1992 interview with Rebecca Adams that, “I scapegoated the word “sacrifice”…The idea of self-sacrifice as necessarily bad, “masochistic,” is once again the dogmatic renunciation of renunciation, the modernistic moralism in reverse we are bound to follow even if it kills us” (29-30).

In the same interview Rebecca Adams refers to Girard’s analysis of the Judgement of Solomon in the Old Testament and suggests an elaboration:

You point out that the woman who gave up her child in order to save it does not do so as an act of “self-sacrifice” or from any wish or duty to scapegoat herself. What she does is desire life for the other, the child; she’s thinking about love, not sacrifice. So you might be able to reinterpret the traditional notion of “self-sacrifice” as “excessive desire on behalf of the Other”; the emphasis is upon giving another life; but it’s not to be understood as a call to scapegoat oneself. (30)

Between the two different motivations for self-sacrifice described by Johnsen and Adams, between the strategy of rivalry and the act of love, there falls another, alluded to by Adams when she discusses the choice to “scapegoat the self”. For women, I believe this can take the form of enacting behaviours that imply they are less worthy or deserving of respect or nurturing or social recognition or creative self-fulfilment than those around them. It also includes acts of self-abnegation and denial as well as self-imposed exile and isolation that derive from the desire to appease physical or emotional violence directed against them and against those who are dear to them. Sometimes this violence is real and bloody. Sometimes it is shadowy: implicit in images and social discourse, embedded in social expectations and assumptions about gender roles and acceptable behaviours. This is the notion of self-sacrifice to which I am alluding in this essay. I believe that when women engage in these types of
self-sacrificial practices they unwittingly perpetuate cycles of violence and oppression. It is for this reason that I am interested in forms of resistance to and non-cooperation with the various imperatives to female self-condemnation and self-sacrifice.

**Church involvement**

After completing my Masters Degree I was offered a job by the Roman Catholic Archdiocese of Adelaide as a project officer in a new parish-based community development programme. The aim of the programme was to re-map parishes into smaller neighbourhood units of roughly 100 Catholic families (practising or otherwise) and convene leadership teams who would facilitate the process of inviting people to get to know one another for mutual friendship and support.

We weren’t, however, able to encourage the sort of broad participation in this project that we had hoped for. The reasons for this are multifarious but one of the things that struck me most forcibly at the time was the reticence, fear and suspicion that we encountered over and over again in the process of trying to encourage people to engage with their neighbours. Some of the issues were purely practical – lack of time and energy, too many other social networks to maintain, suspicion of the church’s motivations, etc. – but I believed I could also detect a deep vein of uneasiness around the idea of unmediated encounters with strangers.

In *Struggles for Subjectivity*, Kevin McDonald explores what he posits as the modern subject’s growing sense of over-exposure and vulnerability to the judgement of others:

> The contemporary personality increasingly panics at the thought of losing the other, and thus continually strives to avoid solitude. But Gauchet insists that this self is also afraid of the other, because of the absence of symbolic distance that will allow the subject to regulate the distance between it and the other. (208)

This has some parallels with Girard’s contention that internally mediated desire (in which there is not sufficient distance between the desiring subject and the mediator/model) runs rampant in the modern world, exacerbating the potential for conflicts of all kind. Is this what we fear in our encounter with the stranger? Or is it
something altogether different? What is clear is that we can no longer presume an uncomplicated desire for community or even sociability, even though, paradoxically, our very human identity appears to depend upon it.

By way of conclusion to this section, I need to make a brief reference to Girard’s explicit philosophical, spiritual and practical commitment to Roman Catholicism. This is one of the aspects of his work that makes it deeply problematic for the academy, especially given the church’s historical collaboration in abhorrent acts of scapegoating and victimisation. Girard does not attempt to deny this, but his thesis that the Judeo-Christian scriptural revelation provides an antidote to the issues he is describing is, naturally, received with deep scepticism.

The Roman Catholic Church is not only one of the most undemocratic institutions in the modern world, it is also one of the most explicitly sexist. While pronouncing consenting adult homosexual relationships to be fundamentally deviant, it has virtually no critique of the widespread collaboration of its own authorities in the cover-up of shocking incidents of child sexual abuse. It is not an institution that sits comfortably alongside my other life choices. But then, of course, it is not so much a choice as an inheritance; it is the place where I learned a faith that has offered me a great sense of meaning and purpose over the years, even though that too is not without its own anguished complications. So any new reading of Roman Catholicism is always of interest to me, especially when it seems to reconcile some of my contemporary experiences and questions with the best of the tradition.

Girard’s contention that the Judeo-Christian scriptures subverted the sacrificial logic of pagan culture and that Christian faith is the key to transcending mimetic rivalry and scapegoating were interesting to me but I was also sceptical about his claims. I therefore felt compelled to explore the following questions via a fictionalisation of my own experience: in what ways are Girard’s claims credible? Do the churches have anything to offer the modern struggle against violence and victimisation?
VI  Buenos Aires: A Setting and a Story

By 2005, I had returned to work in schools, having been offered a position at St. Aloysius College to coordinate their extra curricular social justice programmes. In September 2006, I was asked to accompany a group of students on a school trip to Buenos Aires. The religious congregation that founded St Aloysius, the Sisters of Mercy, came to Adelaide from Ireland via Buenos Aires in the late 1800s and some of their original number returned to Buenos Aires several years later. We maintain connections with the college they established over there as well as financially supporting a number of development projects in the surrounding barrios. The aim of our biennial visits to Argentina is cultural exchange between the two schools as well as involving our students in some of the development work being undertaken in the community centres we support.

The exoticism of Buenos Aires appealed to me greatly and I was keen to gather some material there that I could use for one of my short stories. An incident that occurred on our last night in the city was ripe with possibilities.

We had booked out two floors of a hotel on Avenida de Mayo. When the students were settled in their rooms for the night, one of the other teachers and I went out to explore the city and grab a late bite to eat. After several hours I returned to the room that I was sharing with the supervising teacher who had remained behind. As I opened the door I heard a loud and distinct moan. I thought my roommate was having a nightmare. Several minutes later I heard it again and called out to ask Christine if she was OK. She didn’t answer. I resolved to wake her if she continued to cry out because it sounded as if she was in extreme distress but I didn’t hear anything more after that. The next morning when I went to check on the students I found a large group of them huddling in one room looking a little shifty. Several of them had moved out of their room and bunked in with their friends during the night because they too had been disturbed by a terrible moaning noise. They claimed that one room in particular was terrifyingly cold and that doors and windows had been opening and closing of their own accord. If I hadn’t heard the noise myself I would have been convinced that it was a case of adolescent group hysterics. As it was, I found myself entertaining their assertion that they had been visited by a ghost.
Ghost stories and hauntings are archetypal fictional motifs and when I returned to Australia I began to play with this idea. When I asked myself about the type of situation that might provoke the sort of anguished moaning that I had heard in Buenos Aires, the idea of a missing child sprang immediately to mind. This was not surprising given that child rearing was the activity in which I had been most heavily invested for the previous fifteen years. Losing a child was one of the worst things I could imagine and I decided it would be interesting to confront this fear – to tease it out a little.

Several weeks later, after I returned to Australia, my youngest brother took his own life in tragic circumstances. I do not wish to probe this event very deeply but for the purposes of this essay I need to note my own reactions as they related to the development of the story I had begun to write.

I was ten years older than my brother. Because my mother became ill not long after his birth I was quite actively involved in caring for him as a baby. So while I grieved for him as a sibling there were also vestiges of the maternal in my feelings. I also experienced what I understand are quite common reactions to this type of death: shock and a sense of betrayal, anger, fear, guilt and shame at not having been able to prevent it. All of these emotions began to inform my novel. I also kept returning to Girardian theory to try to understand what had happened to my brother. It seemed to me that he had been deeply conflicted by frustrated desires and thwarted hopes and that, after futile efforts to project the blame outwards had, eventually, turned the sacrificial logic against himself. I don’t know if this is a true explanation of what happened to him. In the end, his motives are essentially unknowable but the questions continue to haunt me: How did he arrive at this point? What were we, who loved him, supposed to do? What can protect others from the false logics and violent impulses that overtook him in the last months of his life? All these emotional strands – grief, guilt, shame, thwarted desire, violent intent – started to make their presence felt in the story I was telling.

As my “ghost story” started to be coloured with these sorts of emotions and themes, other aspects of the Argentinean setting assumed particular significance as thematic echoes or underscorings, the most obvious example being the references to los desaparacidos. The grim rows of blurred black and white photographs, the faces of those who disappeared during the dirty war of 1976 – 1982, can still be found at various public sites around Buenos Aires, especially marking the locations of former secret detention centres. The collective ache for their 30,000 lost sons and daughters is
still palpable in the city of Buenos Aires, but it is also intermingled with anger and incomprehension and guilt and a terrible sense of shame that such a thing could happen in their midst.

VII Early drafts & technical challenges

My short story set in Buenos Aires began to stretch out to 10,000 words and it occurred to me that I might have the beginnings of a novel. Nick Jose encouraged me to explore this possibility but warned me that a novel is a very different beast to a short story. Over the next two years, there were indeed times when the technical problems of producing an extended work of fiction threatened to overwhelm me. I grappled with a plethora of issues including the limitations of the first person voice, the best methods of handling large amounts of exposition, my lack of familiarity with the setting of Buenos Aires and the challenge of dealing with secondary characters who did not speak English. In this section I will outline some of the strategies I employed to come to grips with these challenges.

First Person Voice

When I began my project, the first person voice felt deceptively easy. It conveyed immediacy, authenticity, and a pleasing intimacy of tone. It rollicked along for the first 10,000 words but then quickly began to pall. I started to realise that, if not handled carefully, the single voice and point of view could become monotonous. It also posed another significant narrative challenge: how could information be revealed that was not directly known by the protagonist? In addition, the sameness of tone, the incessant “I”, was creating difficulties in maintaining reader sympathy for my protagonist. Feedback on early drafts from my two supervisors referred tactfully to the “relentlessness” and “all-knowing” tone of the protagonist. Given the weight of the themes I was pursuing, I began to realise that it was going to be quite a challenge to temper the self-obsessed and self-opinionated note that had crept into the voice of my anguished narrator.
Graham Greene describes similar dilemmas in relation to his novel *The End of the Affair*:

Many a time I regretted pursuing “I” along his dismal road and contemplated beginning *The End of the Affair* all over again with Bendrix, my leading character, seen from outside in the third person. I had never previously had to struggle so hard to lend the narrative interest. For example how could I vary the all-important “tone” when it was one character who was always commenting? The tone had been set on the first page by Bendrix — “This is a record of hate far more than of love” — and I dreaded to see the whole book smoked dry like a fish with his hatred. Dickens had somehow miraculously varied his tone [in *Great Expectations*], but when I tried to analyze his success, I felt like a colour-blind man trying intellectually to distinguish one colour from another. For my book there were two shades of the same colour — obsessive love and obsessive hate; Mr. Parkis, the private detective, and his boy were my attempt to introduce two more tones, the humorous and the pathetic. (106)

Greene does not mention here the other “escape hatch” from the first person voice that he employs in *The End of the Affair*. Halfway through the narrative, Bendrix discovers his lover’s diary and for 35 pages the reader is introduced to a different voice as well as being made aware of certain crucial facts that the first person narrator was in no position to know.

One of my supervisors suggested that I experiment with the third person voice in subsequent drafts. While I made a few desultory attempts at this, I kept returning to the first person voice, despite the difficulties. There was something about the claustrophobic intensity of the modern mind conveyed by this limited point of view that seemed to me to be part of the story I was trying to tell. I didn’t want to be able to see into other characters’ minds because one of the central experiences I was attempting to explore was our lack of capacity to really know the mind of the other, the isolating chasms of misunderstanding and miscommunication that open up between us despite all our best attempts. For these reasons I chose to persist with the first person voice.

As Greene turned to Dickens, I turned to a series of fictional exemplars to solve my own dilemmas with the first person narrator. These included Margaret Atwood’s *Cat’s Eye*, Nabokov’s *Lolita*, Lionel Shriver’s *We Need to Talk about Kevin* (addressed to a second person through a series of letters but still from a limited first
person perspective), Dostoevsky’s *Notes from Underground* and Coetzee’s first two volumes of memoirs (written in the third person but limited to a single point of view).

I discovered a number of elements that seemed to contribute to the successful employment of first person (and single viewpoint) narration: heavy injections of humour and self-deprecation, the use of irony and unreliability, drawing on the vivid sensuality of the child’s point of view to break up the more abstract musings of the adult, the inclusion of closely observed detail about other characters and extensive use of well-differentiated dialogue to allow other voices room in the text.

I experimented with all of these techniques, paring back the meandering meditations of the protagonist, trying to introduce humour to break up the relentlessness of tone, focusing on concrete descriptive detail and enfleshing the other characters with as much observed detail as possible. The appeal of drawing on the child’s point of view to engender some sympathy for my protagonist was so great that I attempted to incorporate it in a series of extended flashbacks but these ended up being deleted in subsequent drafts because they distracted from the forward thrust of the narrative.

Whether or not I have been entirely successful in overcoming the many problems associated with the use of the first person voice is for others to judge. In retrospect, I would have to say that it is an extremely risky undertaking for a first-time novelist. Nevertheless, I defend my own choice to persist with it on the grounds that it has been highly instructional for me as an emerging writer (perhaps, ultimately, as a lesson in what one should not do) as well as giving me opportunities to experiment with aspects of unreliable narration. It will be a long time, however, before I attempt to use the first person narrator again in an extended work of fiction.

*“Exposition Dumps”*

Another well-known pitfall for the first-time novelist is the mishandling of exposition, sometimes characterized as “telling, not showing.” My own natural tendency to dump down great wads of retrospective exposition was compounded by my desire to show the mimetic influences on my protagonist, influences that stretched back to childhood. No matter how beautifully written these passages were, however, they seriously impeded the forward movement of the narrative. I thought to solve the problem by
abbreviating these excursions – turning them into little abstract summaries inserted into the protagonist’s interior monologues – but this only aggravated the smug all-knowing tone of the protagonist to which I referred in the previous section.

Over several drafts I experimented with different solutions to this problem. In my second draft of the novel, I decided to pull out these wads of exposition, sequence them chronologically and frame them as discrete scenes that would be inserted between the chapters of the main narrative. I borrowed this idea from Atwood’s *Cat’s Eye*. In this text, the protagonist is an artist who has returned to the city in which she grew up to mount a major retrospective of her work. The bulk of the book is made up of her childhood memories but each section is prefaced by a short chapter, set in the present, detailing her psychological and physical preparations for the exhibition. My intention was to reverse this technique, with the main narrative, set in the present, interspersed by short discreetly framed chapters set in the past.

In an attempt to “kill two birds with one stone”, (because I was heartily sick of the first person voice by this stage), I decided to write these vignettes in the third person. Perhaps the overall technique would have worked if I’d stuck to the first person but the industry feedback that I got on this second draft (from an agent and two publishers) was that the structure was confusing and still detracting from the forward momentum of the main narrative. I think these framed memories or *recuerdos* as I dubbed them were reasonably good pieces of writing (indeed one publisher suggested I might like to rewrite the manuscript focusing on these more Australian-based episodes) but everyone agreed that they were incompatible with the main body of the text.

So I went back to the drawing board. Kate Grenville’s *The Idea of Perfection* gave me some helpful ideas. Her protagonist, Harley Savage, is a middle-aged woman who has been profoundly influenced by events in her past, both from her childhood and from one of her marriages. Grenville devotes one whole chapter to her protagonist’s childhood experiences, thus separating out this slab of significant exposition using a similar strategy to the one I had attempted to employ. Grenville’s strategy is more effective however, because it only occurs once and at a strategic point amid the larger action of the story, when the reader’s curiosity about the protagonist’s motivations and behaviours has been effectively aroused. As to the tragic events of her protagonist’s third marriage, Grenville provides only the merest allusions: brief, cryptic asides that culminate in a revelation that, while only taking up two pages of a
400 page novel, are all that is necessary for the reader to not only understand but also deeply empathize with the protagonist.

In the third draft of my novel I removed the *recuerdos*, which had been cast as scenes, pared them back to a few essential images and fragments of dialogue – thus reducing 20,000 words to about 2,000 – rewrote them in first person and started the laborious process of re-inserting them back into the main body of the text.

**Spanish speaking characters: language-learning as novelistic research**

The other limitation of the first person voice is the diminished resources left to the novelist to provide insight into secondary characters. Dialogue, descriptions of appearance, gestures and behaviours – these were the only techniques I had at my disposal to bring my other characters to life. I could not stray inside their heads or their hearts. The fact that a number of these characters did not speak English added a further layer of difficulty to my project.

Part of my research process involved engaging with a Spanish speaking culture and I wanted to learn as much of the language as I could in the time available to me. I enrolled in a Spanish class with Professional and Continuing Education in 2007 and continued my studies in 2008 through private conversation classes with an Argentinean Spanish language teacher.

The struggles of second-language learning have informed the development of my major project in a number of ways: firstly, as a practical research tool and secondly, as an experiential point of reflection.

While I never intended to narrate the novel from anything other than the foreigner’s point of view, my protagonist required something slightly more elaborated than a tourist’s perspective of the country and its people. I believed that it was necessary to have more insight into the culture than could be gained by observing people and their activities or by pursuing reading-based research. I wanted to establish connections and to be able to converse with the local people.

It is, of course, ridiculously ambitious to expect to achieve any level of fluency in a language in less than two years, especially while living in a country where the language is not spoken, nevertheless, I did make some inroads into the task.
Some of the people I met in Argentina spoke fluent English. A few had as much English as I had Spanish. Others had no English at all but demonstrated enormous goodwill and patience with my stilted attempts to communicate with them in their own language. These partial and handicapped relationships, mediated through what amounts to a two-year-old’s linguistic facility, have informed a number of the character interactions explored in my novel, and reflect, I believe, some of the delights and difficulties that many of us encounter in trying to form connections with others across cultural and linguistic divides in our increasingly globalised world.

From my journal, 12th October 2007:

I am lunching with my friend Maria in The Wellington restaurant in Bella Vista, an Italian restaurant named for an Anglo-Irish military commander situated in an Argentine city. Maria is our school contact in Buenos Aires. She manages and distributes the money our students raise for development projects here. She is the same age as I, has six children, works as a full-time social worker with a foundation for the blind and manages our school-supported projects on a voluntary basis. She thinks my Spanish is hysterically funny while laughingly acknowledging that her English is “un desastre!” Our conversations require extensive use of my pocket dictionary and even the simplest questions can trigger laborious page-flicking – a process that frustrates Maria enormously. She prefers to bypass it with more directly interactive methods if she can.

We are perusing the menu. Do I like salsa mostaza? I shrug. I don’t know what it is. And so she pantomimes:

“Bible” (her hands, palms upwards, joined in a V like an open prayerbook).
“Historia” (I know this one – it’s like the English word – story);
“La semilla más pequeña” (making a little pinching gesture with her forefinger and thumb). Semilla? Seminal? Ah! Seed!)

She then throws up her arms in a broad sweeping movement: “El árbol más grande!”

The grandest tree? Eureka! Mustard Sauce!

On my third visit to Buenos Aires in 2009, I experienced the satisfaction of understanding much more Spanish and speaking the language with greater fluency. This facilitated more intimate connections with individuals in many different settings. It has been one of the great delights of my research process to experience the different patterns of thought, the different modalities of expression and the different styles of relating to others that are gained by learning a second language.
An unfamiliar setting

I have already referred to the initial exotic appeal of using Buenos Aires as a setting for one of my short fictions. Dorothea Brande in her 1934 text *Becoming a Writer* devotes considerable attention to the advantage afforded a writer by maintaining “the vividness and intensity of interest that a sensitive child feels in his expanding world” (103). She points out that this is the way most of us view “a strange town or a strange country” (106) and suggests that the emerging writer would be well-served by turning “yourself into a stranger in your own streets” (106). There have been many times over the last three years when I fervently wished I had taken Dorothea Brande’s advice and not been seduced by the more immediate “vividness and intensity of interest” aroused by the foreign.

Six months after I had begun to expand my short story into a novel I realised that there were things I needed to describe that I had never seen and never known. I couldn’t just pop down the road and have a look or even take a cheap flight interstate as I had done when working on Australian-based stories in the past. I often felt paralysed by my lack of familiarity with vital aspects of the physical setting in which my characters moved and this delayed progress on my novel for many months at a time.

It was fortunate, however, that the Principal of the school where I was working deemed it necessary for me to travel to Buenos Aires a year after my first visit and then again two years later on various work-related matters and I was able to search out the details I needed.

In a seminar on her novel *Dog Boy* presented to English postgraduates at the University of Adelaide in 2008, Eva Hornung described how important it was for her to have an outline of her novel in advance of her one-and-only three-week visit to Russia, as well as a clear idea of the places she needed to see and the experiences she needed to pursue in order to flesh out her story. This was how I approached my subsequent visits to Argentina but I also left a degree of openness to happenstance. Often the encounters and events that I hadn’t planned gave me better material for my novel than the more formal research and fieldwork that I had scheduled. I also made much use of internet maps and images to fill in the missing pieces when I returned home to Australia.
Nam Le tackles a great diversity of settings in his award-winning collection of short stories, *The Boat*. These settings are evoked with extraordinary vividness but he claims on his website that he has not been to most of the places that he writes about:

I wanted to capture not the essence but an essence of these places that felt authentic. Part of this, of course, was just trying to get the details right. I think Marilynne Robinson once said that plausibility was purely a matter of aesthetics; in a much narrower sense, authenticity can be seen as just a matter of accumulating the right details. So yes, I did a fair bit of research to find the right details (and to try to weed out the wrong ones). That said, no, I haven’t been to most of the places in the stories, and even if I had, they wouldn’t have been the same places (or same historical moments) into which I inserted my characters. (2010)

He goes on to make an interesting assertion about the use of dialogue in evoking place:

In stories, of course, human environment is almost entirely linguistic. When you parse it, so-called “identity” often comes down to how we articulate to each other what we think of ourselves. It’s a method both of inclusion and exclusion. And it’s incredibly sophisticated — just look at the significances encoded in slight variations in accent. To a writer, nothing taps into that vein of identity — be it corporate, cultural or individual — as deeply as language — its vocabulary, rhythms, inflections, tempo, grammar. If you can break this code, you’re in. And in fiction, the fix you get from code-breaking — the high of unstepped on access — is so much stronger, because you get to exploit the language of thought as well as speech. (2010)

Eva Hornung took it for granted that she needed to have some basic conversational fluency in Russian when she began work on her novel and was lauded by the language tutor who accompanied her to the 2008 seminar for having picked up the language more quickly than any other student she had ever taught. In the light of Le’s reflections, I would be interested in asking Hornung if she believes there was any correspondence between her facility with the Russian language and her depiction of place in *Dog Boy*.

I envy Hornung’s freakish capacity for language learning and Le’s intuitive approach to discerning “the right details” and tapping into linguistic “codes”. The methods that underpinned the evocation of place in my own work were more laborious and painstaking, pursued through a process of personal immersion, intense observation, detailed recording, journaling and ongoing internet research. Again, it is
for others to judge how successful this process has been. An editor from Penguin remarked of my second draft that “the sense of place is strong and convincing” and that she “could clearly see Buenos Aires in all its chaotic glory”. This gives me some hope that the effort of research has not been wasted. I am, however, looking forward to experimenting with Le’s more minimalist approach in future fictional forays.

VIII Epiphanies, Conversions & Conclusions

Epiphanies

I would like to focus on a specific issue in the second half of this paper, which is the way I attempted to lay to rest the almost spectral question that had revealed itself as my major project evolved through various incarnations: Were there any clues, in what I had been writing about and in what I had been reading, about the ways in which women can resist the violent over/against self-definitions that flow from mimetic rivalry, without resorting to self-sacrifice?

My ideas about what constituted an effective resolution to the situations I had been exploring in the novel shifted beneath me a number of times during the writing process. The eventual decisions I made about this were the result of a complex interaction of personal experience, critical theory, examining the work of other writers, writerly experimentation and my own artistic resistances. It is this interaction that I want to explore in the second part of this essay.

Charles Baxter in his essay Against Epiphanies laments “the mass-marketing of literary epiphanies and climactic insights” which he believes “produces in editors and readers an expectation that stories must end with an insight. The insight-ending, as a result, has become something of a weird norm in contemporary writing” (49). What he seems to be objecting to is the pressure to succumb, in a literary sense, to a comforting but perhaps falsely neat way of understanding life: “Insight is one of the last stands of belief in a secular age … Insight’s connection to the loss of innocence, to a vestigially religious worldview, and to conspiracy theories, makes it particularly suited to a culture like ours that thrives on psychotherapeutic models, paranoia and self-improvement” (49). He concludes, “Sometimes readers are not going to be helped
along by the stories they read. Literature is not an instruction manual” (61). Granted, but even in the examples he cites as “anti-epiphanic”, stories such as Raymond Carver’s, where the narrative is frequently frozen mid-conflict, I would argue that the “freezing point” often directs the reader’s attention to universal cries of anguish that resonate so deeply, we are, nevertheless, in some infinitesimal way, altered, if not “helped” by them. After all, recognising ourselves in the disturbing and uncanny as well as the lofty and inspirational is, as Julia Kristeva would argue, fundamental to the human journey and the process of forming meaningful connections with others (192).

By comparison, Girard’s view of literature has an old-fashioned air of moral concern about it that no doubt irritates those who feel oppressed by the falseness of much so-called “morality” in art and literature:

An exclusive preoccupation with such things as beauty, form, classification, litterarite, etc., hides a secret contempt, I feel, for the literary text, which is regarded as incapable of truth…If one does not believe that certain texts, at least, can help us, not only aesthetically, but intellectually and ethically, especially at a time such as ours, which is no ordinary time, then literature is an empty and dying cult. (Double Business 224)

I do not believe that Girard is proposing the purpose of literature to be the illustration of particular moral theses or positions. He argues explicitly that: “Not literature as such … but certain literary texts are vital to my whole ‘enterprise’ as a researcher, much more vital than contemporary theory” (Double Business 224).

In Deceit, Desire and the Novel; Self and Other in Literary Structure, Girard claims that the “great writers apprehend intuitively and concretely, through the medium of their art, if not formally, the system in which they were first imprisoned together with their contemporaries” (3). In other words, literature can precede theory in its revelation and communication of the most fundamental and profound human struggles. Milan Kundera, a great admirer of Girard (“His Mensonge romantique et verite romanesque is the best book I have ever read on the art of the novel” [Testaments Betrayed 182]), also claims that the revelatory power of the novel is unique: “the novel remains to us as the last observatory from which we can embrace human life as a whole” (Curtain 83).

The novel as observatory? Perhaps. It certainly sits more easily with me than the notion of the novel as an instruction manual. When I sat down to write my
doctoral project I was not conscious of trying to craft something that would be helpful or useful to others. As the novel progressed, my primary struggle was to stay as close as I could to the truth of my own experience, not in terms of the narrative events, which were fictional, but in terms of the patterns of human responsiveness I was trying to depict.

In the opening chapter of Sources of the Self, Charles Taylor’s extended philosophical exploration on the “making of the modern identity” he makes an observation that encapsulates my own compulsions as a writer:

the invocation of meaning also comes from our awareness of how much the search involves articulation. We find the sense of life through articulating it. And moderns have become acutely aware of how much sense being there for us depends on our powers of expression. Discovering here, depends on, is interwoven with, inventing. Finding a sense to life depends on framing meaningful expressions which are adequate. (18)

The writing process for me is always a search for the most accurate articulation of experience and feeling. It is an attempt at this “invocation of meaning” that Taylor describes. Which isn’t to argue that I always succeed in that task – or even usually succeed – but it is the criteria by which I gauge my success or failure as a writer. It was important to me, therefore, to be faithful to this “truth” of human experience as I tackled the resolution of narrative action in my novel and part of the “truth” for me about this was related to a type of conversion experience: a conversion away from the compulsion to self-sacrifice.

Conversions

The theme of conversion in western literature can be traced back to the letters of St Paul, and, in more systematic autobiographical terms, to the Confessions of St Augustine. The term “conversion” is usually used to denote a religious conversion – an acceptance of or a turning toward a particular faith tradition or set of beliefs as in: “conversion to Islam” or “conversion to Christianity”. But the use of the term can also refer to an internal spiritual process, a “change of heart”, something that implies a more profound degree of personal transformation than mere insight or indeed dramatic “resolution” as presented in Aristotle’s Poetics. For Aristotle “resolution” denotes that
which occurs after a reversal of fortune, involving “recognition” or a change from “ignorance to knowledge”, especially with respect to the relationships between major characters (18-19). A “change of heart” as opposed to a shift in cognition is what leads to the deepest shifts in human subjectivity and it was this aspect of personal journeying that I wished to explore.

It would, however, be disingenuous of me to pretend that my novel was not also concerned with aspects of religious conversion, with an attempt to find some reconciliation within the Roman Catholic tradition. My protagonist was not tracing a detached spiritual quest so much as attempting to re-negotiate meaning within a particular communal and institutional embodiment of Christian spirituality. But I was acutely conscious of the potential misreadings this could evoke. Anne Bartlett captures one aspect of my concern when she quotes from an earlier journal in her exegetical essay “Knitting a novel, a retrospective view”:

But of course THAT has been the difficulty I have had in focusing this, that I am so conscious of the degree of Christian offence in the Australian psyche…that it has completely stymied me: i.e. we have been a terrible bunch of wowsers and whackers and killjoys and critics – none of which is in the spirit of the NT [New Testament] Jesus…(15)

Because of the personal experiences and concerns I have outlined, it was important to me to come to grips with this issue in some way but I did not want it to be read as an apologia for Roman Catholicism, especially as I was trying to trace something that, I believe, is much more broadly human. As I proposed at the beginning of this essay, my larger interest was about the ways in which we transcend the conflictive elements of our human intersubjectivity. If I located certain examples of that in Roman Catholicism, I didn’t want that to be read as a claim to exclusivity of any kind.

**Novelistic Conclusions**

Another challenge for me was that Girard himself devotes considerable reflection to what he believes constitutes an authentic “novelistic conclusion”. Not surprisingly, the form this takes in the novels of the canon to which he gives precedence, strongly parallels that of the traditional religious conversion, a conversion that is pre-figured by
the personal conversion of the writer: “The other experience, the conversion experience of the truly great writer, however strictly determined as to content, always retains the form of the great religious experiences” (Things Hidden 400). In Deceit, Desire and the Novel he details the narrative elements in the novels of Stendhal, Proust and Dostoevsky that contribute to this view:

The unity of novelistic conclusions consists in the renunciation of metaphysical desire…

Repudiation of the mediator implies renunciation of divinity, and this means renouncing pride.
The physical diminution of the hero both expresses and conceals the defeat of pride…

Deception gives way to truth, anguish to remembrance, agitation to repose, hatred to love, humiliation to humility, mediated desire to autonomy, deviated transcendency to vertical transcendency… The hero triumphs in defeat; he triumphs because he is at the end of his resources; for the first time he has to look his despair and his nothingness in the face. But this look, which he has dreaded, which is the death of pride, is his salvation. (293-294)

Girard goes on to argue that much contemporary fiction eschews these types of endings and remains stuck in “the existential moment”, reflecting “not a passing fashion but a particular historical and metaphysical situation” (309), thereby acknowledging, albeit obliquely, the difficulties a writer might face in exploring these “conversion” themes in the contemporary context.

These motifs – physical diminution, loss of pride, reconciliation with a former enemy – are not, however, absent in contemporary fiction and perhaps this is because they are such archetypal human experiences. Nor do the processes Girard summarises necessarily have to incline one toward the Christian God.

In Coetzee’s Disgrace, the protagonist, David Lurie, loses everything: job, reputation, home, the capacity to protect his child, creative ability, self-respect. He is moved to ask forgiveness from one he has formerly despised. He seeks out a relationship with a woman with whom he would never have bothered before. In the end, he commits himself to the humble task of disposing of the bodies of neglected dogs.

Coetzee’s protagonists are frequently proud men who have been brought low and while he offers no pat or consoling insights to temper the suffering of these characters he seems to insist on the inevitability of the dilemma. While this may not represent, in its entirety, the form of “novelistic conversion” outlined by Girard, Coetzee’s work captures, for me, significant aspects of the same process.
If David Lurie is incapable of reconciling himself to his own situation and what is happening in his country, his daughter Lucy refuses, in the face of extreme provocation, to define herself over and against her antagonists and thereby rises above the status of victim. She achieves this, paradoxically, by offering her very powerlessness as a point of reconciliation with the formerly powerless other. This is evocatively drawn in a scene where Lurie is arguing with Lucy over her decision to hand her property over to Petrus, a former labourer, and become his third wife in return for protection, especially of the child she is carrying, conceived out of rape:

“How humiliating,” he says, finally, “Such high hopes, and to end like this.”
“Yes, I agree, it is humiliating. But perhaps that is a good point to start from again. Perhaps that is what I must learn to accept. To start at ground level. With nothing. Not with nothing but. With nothing. No cards, no weapons, no property, no rights, no dignity.”
“Like a dog.”
“Yes, like a dog.” (205)

This imagery is reprised at the end of the novel when Lurie finally realises he must permit the euthanasia of a dog to whom he has become very attached. Here, Coetzee invokes Christian symbolism to underscore the act of relinquishment:

He opens the cage door. “Come,” he says, bends, opens his arms. The dog wags its crippled rear end, sniffs his face, licks his cheeks, his lips, his ears. He does nothing to stop it. “Come.”

Bearing him in his arms like a lamb, he re-enters the surgery. “I thought you would save him for another week,” says Bev Shaw. “Are you giving him up?”
“Yes, I am giving him up.” (220)

These represent powerful scenes of conversion for me: tracing the process of letting go of everything that has defined one in the past, (especially definitions of the self that are constructed over or against the other) and committing oneself to new patterns of relationship.

There are other broad generalisations and clues scattered throughout Girard’s work about the ways in which humans might convert away from conflictual mimesis. He emphasises a particular model of Christian conversion: acknowledging one’s “sinfulness” (collaboration in the persecution of others) and turning, in a spirit of humble repentance, to the transcendent God – taking God as a model instead of the
social other. This modelling takes the form of an “imitation of Christ”. At a more
general level, Girard talks about an unconditional renunciation of all forms of
violence, of relinquishing “the idea of retribution”:

Violence is always perceived as being a legitimate reprisal or even self-defence. So what must
be given up is the right to reprisals and even the right to what passes, in a number of cases, for
legitimate defence. Since the violence is mimetic, and no one ever feels responsible for
triggering it initially, only by an unconditional renunciation can we arrive at the desired result.
(Things Hidden 198)

I gave consideration to these elements when plotting out the initial conclusion
to my novel but I also found theorists, sympathetic to Girard, who contested some of
these processes. Regarding the imitation of Christ: Theophus H. Smith makes an
astute observation in his essay “King and the Quest to Cure Racism”:

The example of Coker’s slave and Stowe’s Uncle Tom evince a possible side effect for victims
who practice the imitatio Christi. It is possible to make the sacrificial misconstrual that it is the
victim’s suffering or even destruction that is desired by God or that is efficacious for
transformation. (Wallace and Smith 249)

The imitation of Christ as “the suffering servant” has been evoked in many contexts to
keep the oppressed in their place and it did not seem to me to be a particularly helpful
image to pursue. The “renunciation of violence” theme appealed to me but my
protagonist wasn’t a particularly violent or vengeful woman. Should I instead focus on
the protagonist’s discovery of herself as an emotional persecutor? There was plenty of
room for that in my story. I had an infinite number of ways in which my protagonist
could be set up to be accountable for the diminishment and suffering of those around
her and subsequently awaken to a realisation of her culpability. This, then, was in the
back of my mind as I plotted my first draft, but on completion of this draft, I realised
that there was something wrong. I did not really believe what I had written.

In retrospect I can see that Girard’s characterisation of “the novelistic
conclusion” both helped and hindered my work. On one level it was extremely helpful
to have this kind of literary template abstracted and pointed out to me. I began to look
for versions and variations of it in the fiction I was reading and found it a useful basis
for the preliminary sketching out of the architecture of my own novel. The problems
began to arise when I found myself unable to make my protagonist conform, realistically, to “conversion” as defined in Girardian terms. This was the point at which it was necessary to examine my resistances to the theory, to reflect more honestly on my own experience and to look at the ways in which other authors had resolved comparable dilemmas, especially the way in which they had traced specifically feminine responses to interpersonal rivalry and conflict.

In the following section I will discuss two texts that were particularly influential on this part of my research: Margaret Atwood’s *Cat’s Eye* and Anne Bartlett’s *Knitting*.

**Margaret Atwood’s *Cat’s Eye***

Margaret Atwood’s novel *Cat’s Eye* is a powerful exploration of mimetic rivalry in the lives of women. The action takes place over the whole “growing up” period of painter Elaine Risley’s life and extends to the present moment as she prepares for a retrospective exhibition of her work in Toronto, the city which was the site of many youthful traumas and the place where most of her formative relationships were acted out.

Elaine’s earliest memories focus on her childhood, a period during which she is home-schooled while accompanying her parents on biological field trips throughout Canada. Just after her eighth birthday, her family buys a house in Toronto and Elaine is sent to a normal school where she encounters girls her own age for the first time. Atwood refers explicitly to the mimetic process when her protagonist reflects on this experience: “Playing with girls is different and at first I feel strange as I do it, self-conscious, as if I’m only doing an imitation of a girl” (60).

Unfortunately, after an initial period of acceptance, Elaine’s newfound female friends turn on her, at the instigation of a girl called Cordelia. Elaine becomes the scapegoat, whose victimisation unites the rest of the group. The bullying is relentless (“they comment on the kind of lunch I have, how I hold my sandwiches, how I chew…”[141]) and Elaine’s self-confidence rapidly drains away. This loss of confidence is reinforced by the women’s magazines and catalogues that Elaine has been introduced to by the same group: “I see that there will be no end to imperfection, or to doing things the wrong way. Even if you grow up, no matter how hard you
Elaine, the 50 year-old painter, is still caught in these patterns of self-consciousness and self-criticism, the sense of being not-quite-good-enough, despite her success and modest fame as a painter. This is the demon that haunts her throughout the novel. After giving money to a beggar in the street, she reflects:

I’m a fool, to confuse this with goodness. I am not good.
I know too much to be good. I know myself.
I know myself to be vengeful, greedy, secretive and sly. (182)

As a university student, Elaine encounters other “mimetic” situations. She finds herself in thrall to various men and repeats the old pattern that gave her childhood bullies power over her: she falls into line with the expectations she believes these men have of her; she is desperate to please. Elaine eventually becomes pregnant and marries an artist called Jon. Made miserable by Jon’s affairs and inattention, Elaine makes a desultory attempt at suicide, following which she leaves him, taking their two-year-old daughter, Sarah, to Vancouver to start a new life. How does Elaine escape her mimetic demons and achieve some kind of transformation?

During the period in which the young Elaine is being bullied she attempts to cultivate a prayerful connection with the Virgin Mary (primarily as an act of defiance to one of her tormentor’s Protestant affiliations). One night after being ordered to retrieve a hat from a frozen creek by the group of bullies, she falls through the ice. After dragging herself from the freezing water, she sees an apparition of the Virgin, and feels herself being encouraged to self-preservation. The apparition gives her the strength to pull herself to her feet and attempt to make her way home. “She didn’t want me freezing in the snow. She is still with me, invisible, wrapping me in warmth and painlessness, she has heard me after all” (225).

This image of transcendent feminine compassion prefigures other experiences of female compassion and solidarity, which are always tempered by enough wry insight that we do not succumb to a sentimental reading of them as unequivocally salvific. Elaine joins a feminist artists’ group and achieves minor celebrity as a result of their first joint exhibition. In Vancouver she finds that devoting herself to her painting (not to the internalised expectations of others) helps her to “grow back, into
my own hands” (444). She eventually forms a new relationship with a different sort of man, someone who, in former times, she would have considered “too obvious, too dull, practically simple-minded...a chauvinist of the more amiable sort.” But then “Ben considers me good, and I don’t disturb this faith: he doesn’t need my more unsavoury truths” (448).

In her last day in Toronto, just before her retrospective opens, Elaine recalls a religious ritual she encountered in Mexico that centres on the Feast of all Souls:

> In Mexico they do this festival [Halloween] the right way, with no disguises. bright candy skulls, family picnics on the grave, a plate set for each individual guest, a candle for the soul. Everyone goes away happy, including the dead. We’ve rejected that easy flow between dimensions: we want the dead unmentionable, we refuse to name them, we refuse to feed them. Our dead as a result are thinner, greyer, harder to hear, and hungrier. (455)

As the novel draws to a close, we witness Elaine listening more attentively to her own hungry ghosts. Her exhibition is an (unconscious) tribute to all the figures in her life who have moulded and shaped her, loved and tormented her, and there is an act of gratitude and forgiveness in recalling each one. In reflecting on her vicious caricatures of the mother of one of her childhood bullies, she decides, “I have not done her justice, or rather mercy. Instead I went for vengeance. An eye for an eye leads only to more blindness” (477).

Throughout the narrative, the older Elaine imagines some kind of chance meeting with her youthful nemesis, Cordelia, but it never occurs. What does occur, however, is the kind of identification with her former enemy that is the hallmark of the Girardian conclusion:

> I know she’s looking at me, the lopsided mouth smiling a little, the face closed and defiant. There is the same shame, the sick feeling in my body, the same knowledge of my own wrongness, awkwardness, weakness; the same wish to be loved; the same loneliness; the same fear. But these are not my own emotions any more. They are Cordelia’s; as they always were. (495)

Girard argues that mimetic rivalry is transcended when “the hero sees himself in the rival he loathes” (Deceit 300), when he “renounces the differences suggested by hatred” (300). Atwood’s protagonist acknowledges her own propensity to vilify, to
demonise the other. She acknowledges her own capacity for persecution but this is not
the only realisation that enables her to transcend mimetic rivalry and the cycle of
scapegoating. One of the main ways in which Elaine engages a process of forgiveness
and reconciliation is by articulating the history of her life through her art. One of the
key experiences that underlie her movement toward compassion for others is learning,
via the imitation of intimate and transcendent models, compassion for herself.

**Anne Bartlett’s Knitting**

While mimetic desire is not an explicit theme in *Knitting*, Bartlett devotes
considerable attention to women’s habitual pull towards guilt and self-sacrifice.
The novel deals with the relationship between Sandra, a recently widowed academic,
and Martha, an eccentric but gifted creator of knitted garments and objets d’art.
Martha never goes anywhere without three large bags, the contents of which she will
not disclose.

Sandra and Martha connect around a chance happening in the street and begin
to develop a hesitant friendship, which later gains impetus when Sandra decides to
compile an exhibition of women’s textile art. She embraces this new project as a
welcome distraction from her recent experience of grief and loss.

Sandra, like Atwood’s protagonist, Elaine, is deeply susceptible to the
opinions of others. She is conscious of other eyes upon her: those of her colleagues,
her friends, even her cleaner. She feels judged and diminished by their imaginary gaze
and crafts herself according to expectations that are often the product of her own
projections.

Martha also feels eyes upon her, sizing her up, judging her as mad. This
judgement wounds her but, unlike Sandra, she lacks the resources for any serious
effort at conformity. Martha is too far down the pecking order; she understands that
her mode of dress, lack of education, comparative poverty and her ignorance of
certain codes of social behaviour and interaction effectively exclude her from the
ranks of “normal” people. She bears many of the marks of the Girardian “victim”. Her
childlike alacrity manifests itself as a great openness to people and to experience, but
it also leaves her vulnerable to contempt and exploitation.
Like Atwood, Bartlett also employs surreal imagery to suggest a transcendent agency at work in the narrative. Martha is blessed by a torrent of cherries falling from the ceiling one day when she is taking a nap on a church pew. It is a bounty that does not surprise us when visited upon the generous-spirited Martha.

In the meantime, Sandra continues to struggle against brittle self-consciousness, and unrealistic expectations of both herself and others. As her enthusiasm for her new project develops she convinces herself that she is doing Martha a favour by showcasing her skills, and pushes her to work at an increasingly stressful pace to meet the deadline she has set for the exhibition.

The relentless knitting schedule that Sandra imposes on Martha starts to take its toll but Martha is unable to defend herself against Sandra’s demands. She has been trapped by her own pity for her new friend. We discover what is in the three bags Martha has been hauling around: all the knitting mistakes she has made over the last twenty years – all the things she hopes one day to be able to undo and set right. She reflects on the predicament in which she has found herself as a result of her friendship with Sandra:

She, Martha, had made a mistake, that’s what. A big mistake. She’d said yes instead of no, and now she was in a tangle. And when she got into a tangle, it took years to get out of it. Like those other times, those times when she had done all those other things she didn’t want to do, saying yes when she really wanted to say no. All her gates were broken. People just went in and out as they pleased, and she just let them. (180)

Bartlett is tracing the contours of a different kind of sacrificial behaviour here. It is not that of the victim, randomly chosen by the lynch mob. It is a pattern of self-sacrificial behaviour that we often associate with women. In this instance, it is not driven by a desire to appease the violence of the other (although there are strong overtones of bullying and coercion in Sandra’s behaviour) but by the desire to heal another’s brokenness. Bartlett does not, however, glorify Martha’s actions. She does not hold up this type of self-sacrifice for our admiration. From this point in the novel she begins to make explicit the transformations that are being wrought in her two protagonists.
Martha’s stress levels precipitate a major illness and she is hospitalised. Sandra forces herself to stay with Martha despite recoiling from the hospital environment that reminds her of her husband’s dying and her own guilt about not being physically present to him at the moment of his death. She begins to realise what she has unwittingly done to Martha. Sandra’s friend Kate helps her to acknowledge this: “It’s [the exhibition] never really had much to do with Martha, has it? She was always the means to an end. It’s always been your project” (222). Kate, however, also cautions Sandra not to “be so hard on yourself” (224).

There are other scenes in which Bartlett hints again, symbolically, at an agency that, perhaps, transcends the sum of the characters’ experiences and learnings. A cleaner, dressed in white, appears at the foot of Martha’s bed in hospital. He could be another object of hallucination but as he bends to kiss her she feels herself – indeed imagines the whole room – exploding into flames. When she comes to her senses, her fever has gone, and so have the three bags of mistakes.

This marks a significant turning point for Martha. When Sandra enquires after her missing bags, she tells her, “Do you know what was in them? Rubbish. Things I’d been trying to fix my whole life.” She tells Sandra she doesn’t know where the bags have gone but the fact of their disappearance is “Just as well. I could never have got rid of them. All that waste, all that time and energy” (238). She finds renewed energy to embark on a troublesome knitting project, remarking that “It’s not perfect, but it doesn’t matter. I’m never going to be perfect” (239). Martha has discovered a self-acceptance that enables her to resist the compulsion to endless forms of atonement and later, when Sandra apologises for what she has done to Martha, she also takes responsibility for her own passive acquiescence to Sandra’s demands: “Sandra, it takes two to tango. I should have looked after myself better” (268). She does not claim victimhood. She claims subjectivity.

Martha’s recovery seems to precipitate Sandra’s decline. She must postpone the exhibition that has been helping her avoid confronting her grief and guilt. She revisits all the ways in which she believes she failed her husband:

Poor Jack. He’d never had an easy time of it…all she could remember was how she had pushed and pulled at him…Loving him too hard and all wrong. What she had done with Martha was more of the same, though less intense perhaps. Driving and pushing, organising, creating projects with a purpose, achieving her own ends. And for what? To keep the fear at
bay. Fear. The word had come spontaneously. What did she fear? Nothing, really. Except being alone with her own ugliness. (244-245)

During the course of an Easter service she attends with Kate and Martha, Sandra responds, in spite of her scepticism, to the symbolism of the liturgy. When she takes the chalice from Kate’s hands and sips the wine, she too feels overtaken by the same flame that had consumed Martha in the hospital. She finds herself weeping uncontrollably, and finally, the weight of her grief begins to shift.

Bartlett’s story, like Atwood’s, is not only one of a woman repenting past behaviours. It traces lives as works in progress, creative acts that can only be fully realised through mistakes, through the broken-heartedness of getting things wrong. The protagonists are given the courage to address their broken-heartedness by an ongoing always-already spirit of compassion and forgiveness that plays both between people and within a transcendent realm that also intersects with the ordinariness of lived experience. These were themes and learnings I recognised in my own life experience and ones that I became increasingly interested in exploring in the later stages of my creative project.

**Rebecca Adams’ Theory of “Loving” Mimesis**

While both Atwood and Bartlett offered helpful insights into women’s struggles to transcend self-sacrifice and to embrace more positive patterns of desire and human agency, I was also influenced by the work of Rebecca Adams, a literary theorist who has given considerable attention to Girard’s work.

In a paper entitled “Creative or ‘loving’ mimesis revisited”, Adams grapples with some of Girard’s propositions for transcending the cycle of mimetic violence. She puts forward a compelling argument for a “coherent account of constructive desire as metaphysically fundamental” (1). “We need more than a theory of violence”, she argues. “We need an alternative vision of what human beings could be, or are meant to be” (5). Citing the work of Korean theologian Andrew Sun Park she observes:
this critique points to the problem of conceiving of the imitation of Christ as simply the “giving up” of power, agency and desire, or conversely (and more subtly), as voluntarily taking on the position of the victim in the sense of giving up one’s position as a perpetrator/perpetrator of violence. This injunction paradoxically leaves actual victims disempowered with no possibility of agency or desire of their own, and reifies them in exactly the same social, political and metaphysical position as before – in the position of victims. (15)

She also points out a logical inconsistency in Girard’s “split” framework of “good” and “bad” mimetic desire, in which “good” mimetic desire is associated with the imitation of Christ and “bad” mimetic desire with the imitation of one’s neighbour’s desires.

“Good” mimetic desire in this split framework ends up being a type of divine desire which by definition excludes the human … So it seems that either this godly desire cannot really be imitated by human beings or that it could only be imitated by them at the cost of having to expel their own humanity. (12-13)

She goes on to propose a way out of this conceptual dilemma that also has practical implications for the ways in which people can, and do, transcend the cycles of mimetic violence. What happens, she asks

if the object desired by the mediator is the subjectivity of the proto-subject?…In this scenario, if the proto-subject were to imitate the desire of the mediator, then the proto-subject would desire his or her own subjectivity…Furthermore, no rivalry ensues from this act of mimetic desire, since the object of desire is that which cannot be appropriated by (reduced to the subjectivity of) the mediator. Yet the mediator and proto-subject both get to acquire something through this act of acquisitive mimesis – that is, greater subjectivity, desire, and relationship than either had before. (22)

Where and how are people transcending victimisation and violent self definitions formed over and against the social other? This was the vague, half-formed question with which I began, and the following reflection by Rebecca Adams on the type of “conversion” required for such transcendence seems a pertinent way to conclude:

This change of perspective involves a type of conversion, but not a conversion away from mimetic desire or to a sacred which is wholly Other. Rather, it is the conversion to a new
viewpoint which recognizes the already existing reality of the deeply intersubjective, interdependent and unfolding nature of human relationships and life...original sin must not be desire itself, especially the desire for selfhood, agency and subjectivity, as is often claimed in traditional theologies of pride. Rather, original sin can be understood as a powerful name for the refusal or loss of this open system of intersubjective and unconditional relation to God and others by which we are constituted. (27)

Non-violent subjectivity can never be a matter of mine versus yours: my fulfilment at the expense of your subjugation, your fulfilment at the expense of my self-sacrifice. Our fullest humanity requires that we maintain a passionate commitment to our human interdependence and mutual subjectivity. This reflection offered me significant insight into the ways in which it might be possible to begin to break free from patterns of persecution as well as old habits of self-sacrifice and gave me ideas about the sorts of elements that I could explore in plotting the conclusion to my novel.

IX Concluding Reflections

Girard first identified patterns of mimetic rivalry while studying the novels of Cervantes, Flaubert, Dostoevsky, Stedhal and Proust. He went on to extrapolate this as an anthropological theory in Violence and the Sacred. He believes that the mechanisms of human behaviour and interaction that he discovered first in literature and then later through a more intensive study of mythology and the foundational rites and rituals of various cultures are universal and trans-historical. Furthermore, he asserts that he regards certain novelists as “co-theorists” because of their imaginative and holistic grasp of human desire, self-deception, rivalry, persecution and redemption. Kundera echoes this appreciation of novelistic insight in his extended literary essay, The Curtain.

I realised with astonishment that I did not know how and why we had become what we were; I wasn’t even sure that a century earlier, I would have chosen to be Czech. It was not the knowledge of historical events that I lacked. I needed some other kind of knowledge, the kind that, as Flaubert would have said, goes into “the soul” of a historical situation, that grasps its human content...There are cases where nothing can make up for the absence of a great novel. (156 -157)
According to Girard and Kundera, in the hands of a great writer, the novelistic form is capable of revealing something unique and irreplaceable about the human condition. If Girard’s anthropological suppositions are correct, the literature that resonates most profoundly with the truth of lived human experience, will inevitably throw light on mimesis, rivalry, victimisation, human reconciliation and transcendence.

Literature that sets out to illustrate theses, however, is less likely to have such revelatory qualities. As I discovered in the course of developing my own work, attempting to reproduce someone else’s ideas can stifle imagination, result in numbing clichés and caricatures and tempt the writer to pre-ordained conclusions that do not necessarily reflect the truth of his or her own lived experience. Has my project added anything to Girard’s anthropological thesis? I don’t want to interrogate it too closely on these terms. My main hope is that it portrays something real and truthful about human relationships and identity and about women’s struggles against self-condemnation and self-sacrifice in particular.

It took three drafts of my novel before I was happy that I had satisfactorily addressed the major literary and thematic challenges discussed in this exegetical essay. 50,000 discarded words sit alongside the remnants of the ficto-critical biography and the drafts of the ten short stories with which I began. Even so, it will be obvious to an informed reader that the questions that arose in the course of my research are beyond the scope of any individual project. Some of them were taken up as major themes in my novel; many were treated with the merest brushstroke. Others await further elaboration and exploration in future creative writing endeavours.

The first stanza of Louis MacNeice’s poem “Entirely” captures something of my feelings as I finish off this project that has consumed so much of my life over the last five years:

If we could get the hang of it entirely
    It would take too long;
All we know is the splash of words in passing
    And falling twigs of song,
And when we try to eavesdrop on the great
    Presences it is rarely
That by a stroke of luck we can appropriate
    Even a phrase entirely. (158)
I like to think that my creative project has been an attempt to “eavesdrop on the great presences”, but I am also aware that it remains, inevitably, as partial as “the splash of words in passing and falling twigs of song”. This essay has served a different purpose: helping me to clarify where I have been and therefore, perhaps, giving me a way of moving forward into further experiences of unknowing.

I return to Margaret Atwood’s characterisation of the writing process:

Obstruction, obscurity, emptiness, disorientation, twilight, blackout, often combined with a struggle or path or journey – an inability to see one’s way forward, but a feeling that there was a way forward, and that the act of going forward would eventually bring about the conditions for vision… (xxiii)

Yes, it has been all of that but there have also been signposts along the way and this essay has been an attempt to explore some of these signposts. Critical theory was one of them. The work of other novelists was another. Experience, relationship, mentorship, and sometimes just sitting in silence and unknowing, these too have contributed to the creative process.

James Alison, along with Girard and Kundera believes that “the process of finding ourselves through narrative, not mathematics, is the most trustworthy form of access to truth, and finally the one our humanity cannot do without” (Being Liked 22). I submit this essay and the novel “Tracings of Absence” in the hope that the narrative searching contained in both might make some small contribution to that process.
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**Creative Writing**


**Fiction**


Tracings of Absence

Susan Holoubek

Major creative work (novel)
Submitted as part of the thesis for the degree of
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  Discipline of English
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